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Exhibitors at International Trade Fairs: The Influence of Export Support

This research examines the issue of performance measurement of trade fair exhibitors and export assistance. A comparative analysis addresses whether exhibitors using export support and those who do not experience differential performance results.

The objective of this research is twofold: First, to develop measures of performance whereby results from participating in international trade fairs can be evaluated; second, to identify whether companies using export assistance programs differ in their pre-fair promotion efforts to attract visitors, and outcomes of their trade fair participation, from those exhibiting independently. Preparation for trade fairs is reflected through multiple measures, such as staff training activities, customer contact, and publicity efforts. Performance variables are developed to capture quantitative and qualitative dimensions, as well as reflect immediate and delayed results of the trade fair participation.

This study is based on mail survey data generating 230 usable questionnaires of Canadian companies (representing a response rate of 32.6%) exhibiting at international trade fairs. The sample was drawn from four industry sectors (food, machinery, electric and electronic, services). The foreign market involvement of the sample firms shows a very broad geographic scope, and the portfolio of international trade fairs covered by the participants reflects a similar global diversity.

Among the key findings are:

- a) companies using export assistance when exhibiting and those who do not are not different in their characteristics and structure except that the independent group shows a slightly greater foreign market orientation and export dependence,
- b) exhibitors using assistance place less emphasis on staff training, undertake less pre-show promotion to attract visitors, stage fewer special events for visitors, and generally appear to rely more on the assistance and organizational support provided by the support program,
- c) performance of exhibitors using export support is substantially lower in developing leads, converting leads into sales, achieving sales at the fair, as well as achieving specific trade fair objectives.

The analysis of these behavioral and performance dimensions shows that there are differences between assisted and independent exhibitors in their management of ITFs, as well as in various performance measures. Lessons and implications for both, trade fair exhibitors and export assistance program providers, include: assistance users are at an earlier stage in the exporting process and their lower competitiveness and greater uncertainty may motivate them to seek assistance. Export support providers then should target these companies and lend assistance in the early export preparation phase. Helping these exhibitors with the management of ITF activities will result in greater learning and subsequently independence from support programs.