

Africa's exhibition challenges and opportunities

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South African exhibition and events specialist, Scan Display, has extensive experience working on projects throughout Africa, with a network of distributors on the continent. Scan Display's managing director, Justin Hawes, addresses some of the issues related to the African exhibition industry.



Scan Display distributors at an African distributor conference in Johannesburg in June 2019

History

Exhibitions are a great marketing medium for Africa. They have thrived here for centuries in the form of marketplaces; vibrant meeting spaces where people can present their stock to potential buyers. But despite Africa's strong exhibition history, there are some factors that challenge the industry.



Justin Hawes at Mulungushi International Conference Centre in Lusaka, Zambia

Underutilised opportunities within the exhibition medium

The exhibition medium is versatile and can be adapted to different markets. One critical decision about any show is how targeted it will be. If it's too niche, it might not pull in good attendance numbers. However, if it's too broad, your exhibitors are unlikely to connect with enough of the right people, giving them a poor return on investment. The sweet spot is somewhere in the middle.

Unfortunately, because most industries and markets in Africa are fairly small, and exhibitions carry a significant cost investment, many organisers are risk-averse and tend to favour general broad-based shows. This makes consumer fairs popular, but there is a lack of specialised shows. This has affected people's perception of exhibitions, and many believe exhibitions don't deliver good returns. This misconception limits the industry's growth.



Magical Kenya Travel Expo at Kenyatta International Convention Centre in Nairobi, Kenya

The full potential of business tourism is untapped

Exhibitions are an incredible tool for growth and development across all industries. They bring professionals together to share best practice standards, and help businesses find new partners, suppliers and clients. Unfortunately, few African governments are actively growing business events.

The tourism associated with business events generates even more benefits for the host destination. Business tourism generated by Meetings Africa 2018 was reported to contribute R115bn to the South African economy.

Rwanda is the perfect case study on how this can be achieved. It has done an unbelievable job attracting business events (mostly conferences) to the country in just a few years. Its success is due to a purposeful strategy, which includes building a strong convention bureau that understands the industry; having convenient flights for delegates, visa-free travel access, and a first-class venue (Kigali Convention Centre) co-located with an upmarket hotel. As a result of these efforts, the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) has ranked Rwanda as the 2nd most popular destination for conferences and events in Africa.



Alastair Stead and Ernest Lusinga of Scan Display at Magical Kenya Travel Expo

Venue restrictions

Large and lucrative international exhibitions and conferences that are looking for a host destination will typically assess venues based on whether they offer the following:

- A minimum of 5,000m² floorspace on one level, free of pillars or obstructions, and with a high ceiling.
- Good ducting underneath the floors, for the tidy and safe laying of electrical cables.
- A dependable electrical supply that can handle large loads, so exhibitors can run energy-hungry equipment if they want to.
- Accessible loading bays.
- Convenient hotel accommodation.

Most of the larger convention centres in South Africa meet these standards, while many venues elsewhere in Africa don't.

This deters organisers, as it introduces challenges, increases costs, carries greater risks, and impacts the design of exhibition stands being built.

The challenges are also opportunities

The good news is that by identifying these challenges, we can also identify opportunities to grow the African exhibition industry. These can be summarised as follows:

- While many exhibition organisers do have successful events, some events could be improved. Organisers need to educate themselves, and their exhibitors, on what they can do better. As more shows succeed, the industry will be able to showcase its capabilities, which in turn will stimulate uptake and growth.
- Although many industries in Africa are too small to support large local exhibitions, there is scope to grow them through business events. Exhibitions co-located with conferences are a good way to do this.
- Government can offer greater support to the business tourism sector, much as Rwanda is doing. They can make it easier to host international events by improving bureaucratic processes, such as simplifying the visa process, and ensuring customs is more business-friendly. And they can invest in the industry, possibly in the form of public-private partnerships, with a view to the long-term benefits business tourism will create.

It's a good idea to use a local partner when working in another African country. They will be able to help you avoid border delays, and guide you through any unfamiliar processes with their insider knowledge.

Scan Display has distributors in Botswana, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. If you would like assistance with exhibiting in Africa, contact Scan Display's Managing Director, Justin Hawes, on +27 82 570 7280 or justin@scandisplay.co.za.

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