

Promoting California Grown Specialty Crops at International Trade Shows

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Introduction

Trade shows accounted for nearly 40% of marketing budgets for B2B firms in 2011 (CEIR, 2016) and the effect goes beyond the border. In recent years, businesses use trade shows to develop new international markets and diversify their export/import partners to avoid being a victim of a global trade war. Case evidence supports international trade shows as being an important factor in the development of small-scale exporters and, in particular, export start-ups (Evers, 2008).

Through a review of past literature on the trade show industry and other business events, conclusions can be drawn about the current conditions of the trade show industry. Most barriers to attending business events include, but are not limited to money, time, information, and location (Kay, Myers, Mair, & Berne, 2009). Further, less tangible barriers occur during the trade show itself and hinder its effectiveness and connections between exhibitors and buyers. Aspects like variety deficiency and connection dysfunction may occur at the trade show and deter potential customers from coming back to trade shows and from engaging with exhibitors (Walker, 2018).

Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify the major barriers for specialty crop exhibitors to attending international trade shows.

Methods

The first phase of this project involved interviewing executives in the specialty crops industry to inquire on their experience with trade shows. Seven executives in the specialty crop industry who have experience with trade shows (e.g., partners of specialty crop growers group, president of a state industry association, and CEOs of state chamber of commerce for minorities) were interviewed during May and October 2018.

A semi-structured question guide consisting of eight questions was used to obtain key insights on the current conditions of the trade show industry. Main points were taken from the interviews, transcribed and coded. The information gleaned from the interviews was used to construct a survey that will be distributed to specialty crop producers with aim to further understand the barriers to attending trade shows.

Results

The executive interviews suggest that the specialty crop industry struggles to break into international markets due to the high cost of exhibiting at international trade shows, coupled with the tight budgets and time constraints of small businesses. They indicated that many of these small businesses are struggling to have the resources (e.g., money, personnel, and general knowledge) necessary to break into new markets. There is also lack of information on potential Return on Investment (ROI) and how small businesses can participate in a national/state pavilion at a trade show.

All of these scenarios add to the barriers to attending trade shows, suggesting a need for more information to guide small businesses to make cost effective decisions and strategies that will ultimately benefit the specialty crop industry.



Main Themes

The interviews suggest a number of barriers for specialty crop companies to enter into trade shows, most of them stemming from the small size of many specialty crop firms. We found that a lack of personnel, money, resources, and time prevent smaller companies from entering into trade shows. The interviews also suggested the critical importance of trade shows to smaller companies, as they offer the resources and networking opportunities to take the business to the next level. Making the most out of a trade show may be a daunting task to smaller companies since a lot is at stake given the expense of exhibiting and the opportunity cost of being away from the business during the trade show. By offering detailed information about the trade show and how to make the most of it to prospective companies, these smaller companies would be more likely to attend trade shows.

Next Steps

The next phase of this project will involve designing a survey instrument and distributing the survey to specialty crop producers. The results from the survey will be analyzed and will be distributed to trade show organizers, industry organizations, and specialty crop producers to promote attendance at international trade shows.

Main Themes - Major Barriers to Show Participation

"There a few challenges such as funding; getting others to trade shows can be very expensive considering time, travel, lodging and samples and all those things can be very expensive ... and the ROI is hard to tell."

Expenses/ROI



"Usually in small companies they have one or two people dedicated to marketing, it's usually the owners or someone else, so for them to go for a week to 10 days at a trade show a business can be very [difficult]"

Personnel



"They [trade show organizers] get stuck in a little rut and do the same thing the same way over and over ... I would love to see them bring some innovations in terms of what we can all do when we're all there to present our progress and our information."

Lack of Innovation



"Trade shows are a super intimidating experience for me ... Try to navigate in a foreign country ... I wish there is someone just holding our hands and take us there as a group. That would be amazing and I would have done it five years ago."

Lack of Support

