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# **Professional communication: does meeting preferences constitute effectiveness**

## **Abstract**

Trust and commitment are the most prevalent components of relationship duration in business-to-business context. Based on research results and arguments raised by Sheth (1976), Anderson and Narus (1990), Moorman, Zaltman and Despande (1993) and Dash, Bruning and Guin (2007) one would expect that professional communication should be timely and appropriately frequent in order to evoke trust and commitment. The appropriateness means that for effective communication, all communication activities ought to be aligned to receiver's preferences. We argue that meeting preferences of total process outcome might be more powerful than concentrating merely on subsequent interactions. In the article, the authors develop and test empirically hypotheses based on presented notions. The research is focused on dyadic buyer-seller professional communication on business markets in Poland.

Keywords: Professional Communication, performance, mystery visitor

## **Introduction**

Communication on business markets is usually a long-term process, involving many individuals, both on the vendor's, as well as on the buyer's side. Exploratory research conducted by the Department of Marketing Strategy has found that this process often gives rise to numerous mismatches (in terms of form, content and communication methods) of the buyer's expectations and the vendor's actions. Such mismatches are resolved through negotiations in cases where there is no negotiating power asymmetry or, should such asymmetry arise, through the imposition of the solutions preferred by the dominant party. If we assume a relative balance of power between the two parties, it is important, both from the research and pragmatic viewpoint, to pinpoint those areas of communication mismatch, where the vendor may introduce steps improving the communication process with the customer. This article analyses the process of professional communication in an isolated research environment, i.e. a trade fair meeting. Two professionals engaging in communication (the vendor's representative and the buyer's representative) meet at a trade fair, which in itself constitutes an excellent example of a communication process. An important issue in the

analysis of professional communication is the already mentioned long-term nature and complexity of the communication process. The use of the trade fair environment as a research setting provides an overview of the entire communication process and enables an analysis of the individual interactions of the communication partners.

It is worth noting that a trade fair is more than just an interesting area of business context research, but it is also important from a practical point of view. It is estimated that businesses allocate as much as 70% of their promotional budget for the trade fair. Therefore boosting the effectiveness of the whole communication process is of enormous significance.

## **Professional communication in a trade fair environment**

Trade fairs are events that bring together, in a single location, a group of suppliers distributors and related services who set up physical exhibits of their products and services from given industry or discipline (Black, 1998). Trade fairs play an important role in many industrial sectors. They are a good source of information, as they enable companies to see the range of products offered by their competitors and observe market trends, all that simultaneously in a single location. From a company's viewpoint it is also vital that trade fairs, as a meeting point of customers and business partners, are conducive to maintaining relations and signing contracts.

Researchers investigating trade fairs point out that these events are undergoing significant changes both in terms of quantity (rise in the number of trade fair events and visitors) and quality (Kuca and Mruk, 2006). In the latter case the most important element is the transformation of a trade fair from a sales space into a communication space. More and more companies treat trade fairs not as a vehicle to directly generate sales, but as an arena where contacts with customers can be established and developed<sup>1</sup>.

The companies' focus on the communicative role of trade fairs has turned them into a relationship marketing tool, rather than a transaction marketing instrument. This is yet another important reason to investigate the communication behaviour patterns at the trade fair. From a relationship marketing perspective, a trade fair constitutes:

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<sup>1</sup> This is borne out, among others, by the findings of the survey conducted among Polish exhibitors in 2004 - trade fairs are the perfect opportunity for professionals to discuss problems of the sector and new trends and they have a considerable impact on future purchase decisions. Survey conducted among 300 Polish exhibitors, Pentor Research International, Trade fairs and exhibitions have been changing their image, Polish Trade Fairs Organization, Poznan 2005, [http://www.polfair.com.pl/pentor\\_dobre\\_en.htm](http://www.polfair.com.pl/pentor_dobre_en.htm)

- a platform for building and developing partnerships (maintaining relations), reflected in the mutual trust and commitment of the entities involved (Morgan and Hunt 1994)
- a communication process aimed at creating and distributing knowledge.

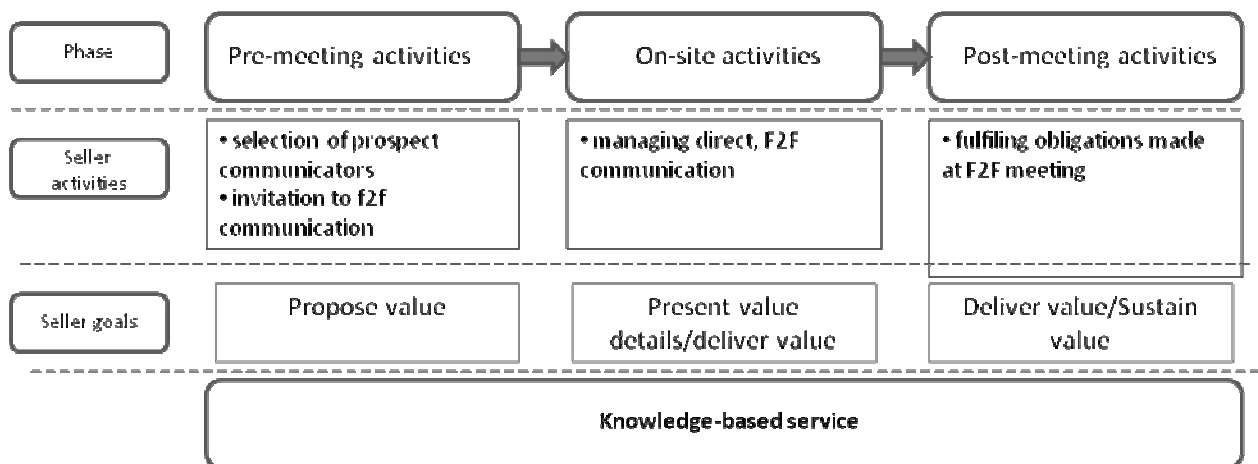
This article focuses on the second interpretation of the role of contemporary trade fairs and postulates that the effectiveness of the whole communication process depends on the effectiveness of its subsequent stages.

## Trade fair communication

One of the fundamental premises of marketing in general and relationship paradigm and new dominant logic in particular, is its focus on the customer (partner) who actually creates value (Grönroos 2006, Vargo and Lusch 2004). In the communication process the success of communication is determined by matching the message and the choice of the communication channels to the receiver’s perception capacity and preferences. Thus it seems that in order to fully explain communication in the business context one should analyse it in view of both communication models (i.e. process model and semiotic model).

An element of matching communication to perception and preferences can be found for example in the Schramm communication model (Goban-Klass, 2001), which introduced the notion of a “shared field of experience” among communication partners. The said field encompasses attitudes, ideas and symbols shared by the sender and receiver that determine the effectiveness of the communication process. On the other hand it is also important to adjust the communication process itself: the choice of a channel or separating the particular stages of that process.

**Figure 1. Communication process for trade fairs**



Source: own study

The relationship between the visitor and the exhibitor is shaped in a process consisting of three stages – contacts prior to arriving at the stand, during the visit at the stand and following the completion of the visit (see Fig.1). These three stages involve a number of different interactions. Therefore, understanding the entire process in which relations are formed requires an interaction approach, i.e. studies that focus on exchange processes and relationship formation between organizations (Hakansson, 1982). The interaction approach to professional communication is thus a process approach. It aims at a more thorough understanding of interaction, and its forms and development processes over time. Therefore aspects of interpersonal communication must be taken into consideration in researching exchange processes from an interaction/network perspective (Olkkonen et al., 2000). Interpersonal communication is a substantial part of the interaction process and can therefore be regarded as a processual element of relationships and networks. Relationships and networks are essentially formed by interpersonal communication processes which, in turn, are affected by their contextual and structural factors. Relationships and networks, therefore, cannot be understood without having knowledge of the communication processes occurring within them, and communication processes can be understood only if the situational factors (contextual and structural characteristics) are considered (Olkkonen et al., 2000). Taking the above comments into consideration, the article proceeds to focus primarily on the process perspective.

## **Constructing hypotheses**

As already mentioned, a trade fair constitutes a communication process aimed at creating and distributing knowledge. The success of the whole process depends on how effectively its subsequent stages are executed. In the case of trade fair communication, where the communication process participants have not met before, it can be assumed that the beginning and/or the end of the process may be of crucial importance (first/last impression). It is also worth noting that the middle stage of the process (i.e. dialogue at the exhibition stand) is determined by a wide range of subjective factors (e.g. judging the interlocutor by their appearance), difficult to evaluate objectively, like the technical and functional qualifications of the staff or the impact of the display stand itself on the visitor. That is why the analysis of the communication process discussed in this article was based on measurable data, such as time or the fact of performing specific activities.

Professionals visiting the trade fair have limited time at their disposal and strive to allocate it effectively for meetings with other entities. European research has shown that a visitor spends the average of four to six hours at the trade fair, with approx. 11 minutes spent at each stand. The exhibitor-vendor has, therefore, little time to serve the prospective customers. It should be assumed that being aware of the expectations of the visitors (i.e. the customers) the exhibitors (i.e. the vendors) will do their best to make sure that the person who approaches their stand will receive reasonably quick service. Therefore:

H1a: Staff at the stand match the first stage of service to visitors' preferences, not exceeding the time a visitor is willing to spend waiting to make first contact

The standard scenario (in most cases) is that each exhibition stand has its first contact desk. The task of the staff at that desk is to investigate the needs of the customer (who do they wish to speak to and what subject matter is of interest to them) and to check the customer service capacity (verifying whether a specialist is available and/or keeping the customer at the stand if no immediate contact can be made with a specialist).

A vital element in making first contact is managing the moments of truth. If the requested person (e.g. a technical consultant) is not present at the stand or that person is not available to the visitor (e.g. due to having another meeting), the staff at the stand should take actions either aimed at keeping the visitor at the stand or encouraging them to return later. Therefore:

H1b: Staff at the stand matches the first stage of service to the visitors' expectations, reacting in a manner preferred by the visitors

We also formulate two other hypotheses to capture interaction between potential client and stand staff should there be no immediate availability of vendor's specialist (i.e. a person who a visitor would like to talk to)<sup>2</sup>. Again, we split the interaction preferences/behaviour in two blocks which are concerned with: a) time and b) event handling. Thus:

H2a: Staff at the stand match the second stage of service to visitors' preferences, not exceeding the time a visitor is willing to spend waiting to contact a specialist

And

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<sup>2</sup> This stage split reflects usual service split for meeting with unscheduled visitors.

H2b: Staff at the stand matches the second stage of service to the visitors' expectations, reacting in a manner preferred by the visitors

It seems that a critical component of an effective communication process could be the use of contacts established at the trade fair to continue the relationship (keeping in mind the assumption that trade fairs constitute a space for communication, not sales). Failure to execute the last stage of the service (namely neglecting the follow-up) can make all the efforts of the vendor in preparation for the trade fair go to waste. That is why the exhibitors should do their best to prevent discrepancies between the visitors' expectations and the actions of the company's personnel. These actions include, in particular: offering to make contact, agreeing the form and time of such contact and making the planned contact. That is why the H3 hypothesis is as follows:

H3: Staff at the stand execute a follow-up reflecting the visitors' preferences:

- a) suggest a contact (show initiative)
- b) match the time of the contact to the visitor's preferences

Below we outline the assumptions and the plan of our study, which allowed us to verify our hypotheses.

## **Study**

The search for answers to the question regarding the ways in which exhibitors adjust the communication process to their visitors has led us to design a study aimed at discovering the degree of such adjustment. This approach is justified by a belief that when selling a tangible product in the business-to-business arena, the vendor often finds that the services provided in conjunction with the product are considered more important by the customer than the product itself (Cann, 1998).

In order to put the hypotheses to the test, the study employed two different research methods, separate for the visitors and the exhibitors. We adopted a new approach to simultaneously learn the preferences of visitors (direct interview) and behaviour patterns of exhibitors (participant observation using role play).

### ***Research venue***

The Meble 2006 trade fair held in May 2006 by Poznań International Fair was selected as the research venue. Poznań International Fair is Poland's largest exhibition organiser (Kuca

and Mruk, 2006), while the Meble trade fair Poland's biggest meeting of the furniture-making industry. A group of 67 exhibitors offering beds and lounge furniture was selected for the study. The group was selected due to its homogenous nature and the possibility to vary roles in the participant observation described below.

## ***Sample***

### **Selection of visitors**

In order to preserve the homogeneity of the studied sample, research was carried out only in the exhibition halls where the Meble 2006 trade fair was held. Moreover, only the visitors who declared that they had come especially to the Meble 2006 trade fair were selected from among the individuals present in the exhibition halls.

The interviews were conducted on May 31, 2006, a day allocated solely to professional visitors. The study began at 2 p.m., so that the visitors could have sufficient time to see the exhibition. 250 interviews were carried out, of which 244 qualified for the analysis of the results. The obtained findings are representative for the trade fair visitors on that day ( $N=6000$ ,  $\varepsilon=4.4\%$ ,  $z=1.96$ ). As there was no list of visitors from which a random sample could be selected, the sample was chosen by selecting each  $n$ th person entering the exhibition halls where the researched stands were located. The interviews were conducted by trained pollsters.

### ***MV methodology***

Each stand of the companies selected for the study was approached by three appropriately trained Mystery Visitors. A research unit in this study was a single visit, not a single exhibitor.

The researchers were allocated three different roles reflecting different purchase potential (individual purchase: an apartment and a large house; institutional purpose: hotel<sup>3</sup>). Each Mystery Visitor followed the same scenario and observed the same behaviour of the staff, recording it in a special questionnaire after the visit. The procedure for the Mystery Visitor interview is presented in Appendix 2. The total of 210 observations were made.

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<sup>3</sup> The list of roles is presented in the Appendix.



## Findings

### *Visitors*

The visitors were dominated by men (59.7%) and individuals participating in more than 3 trade fair events annually. The latter feature suggests extensive experience of the subjects of the study in the area of trade fair communication, as they take part in trade fairs both as visitors (  $n=3,70$ ;  $n=4,26$ ) and as exhibitors (  $n=3,48$ ;  $n=4,52$ ).

Nearly one in two visitors spends one day at the trade fair. Every third person allocates two days for visiting the exhibition. Around 20% of the trade fair audience decided to allocate as many as five days for the trade fair (four exhibition days and an early arrival to or later departure from Poznań).

**Table 1. Time allocated by the visitors to meetings at Meble 2006 trade fair**

Detailed breakdown	Average	Standard deviation	Mean	Max	Min
Number of days allocated to the Meble 2006 trade fair (days)	1.90	1.05	2	7	1
Number of hours per day (h)	5.53	1.85	6	12	1
Number of minutes per stand (m)	8.77	8.67	10	60	1

Source: research findings

Every day the visitor spent the average of 5.5 hours at the fair grounds (see Table 1). Taking into account the length of the visitor's stay at Meble 2006 and the average time spent at the trade fair during the day, the visitor has 10.5 hours to see the products showcased by the exhibitors. The longest visit at the stand did not exceed 60 minutes. The trade fair public devoted the average of 9 minutes to one stand. With the declared averages – the total number of hours allocated for a trade fair visit (10.5 hours) and the average time spent at a stand (9 minutes) it can be established that the visitor can visit around 70 stands. This constitutes barely 18% of all companies exhibiting at Meble 2006 (according to the trade fair catalogue, the number of exhibitors stood at 392).

### **Approach stage 1**

The first impression of the visitor may affect their perception of the whole visit at the stand. This impression is shaped based on what happens immediately upon the visitor approaching a stand. As our research has shown, the visitors are not willing to wait too long for personnel. Three quarters of the visitors reported not waiting more than 5 minutes. (Table 2).

**Table 2. Time a visitor is willing to wait for the response of exhibitor’s personnel**

<b>Detailed breakdown</b>	<b>Percentage of respondents</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
up to 3 minutes	50.8%	123
3-5 minutes	25.6%	62
5-10 minutes	6.6%	16
time is irrelevant	9.5%	23
I don’t wait at all	7.4%	18
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>242</b>

Source: research findings

The vast majority of visitors approaching a stand expect, first and foremost, to talk to a specialist, who will be capable of answering their queries. Over half of the visitors want to hold talks with a specialist immediately upon approaching a stand, which means that the first person they come in contact with should be qualified and possess expert know-how. (Table 3).

**Table 3. Visitors’ expectations regarding the scope of first contact**

<b>Detailed breakdown</b>	<b>Percentage of indications</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Possessing expert know-how	53.7%	131
Calling a specialist to the stand	30.7%	75
Pointing to a specialist	16.0%	39
Offering refreshments	6.1%	15
Providing materials about the company	29.5%	72
Taking down personal details /asking for a business card	10.7%	26
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>146.7%</b>	<b>358</b>

Source: research findings

### **Approach stage 2**

Two out of three visitors are willing to spend up to 5 minutes waiting for a specialist, while nearly every fifth visitor waits as long as is necessary to make such contact. It is therefore apparent that following the first contact the tolerance for waiting time increases (Table 4).

**Table 4. Tolerance for waiting time to establish contact with a specialist**

<b>Detailed breakdown</b>	<b>Percentage of respondents</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
up to 3 minutes	33.6%	82
3-5 minutes	33.6%	82
5-10 minutes	12.3%	30
time is irrelevant	16.8%	41

I don't wait at all	3.7%	9
no response	0.0%	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>244</b>

Source: research findings

It is an important conclusion, as professional buyers expect the first person they encounter at the stand to be a specialist (Table 3).

If dialogue with a specialist is not possible, then visitors are willing to wait for such a possibility, provided they are given a specific waiting time (e.g. in minutes) or an approximation (e.g. “in a moment”, “in a few minutes”) (Table 5).

**Table 5. Declared preferences of professional visitors when specialist unavailable**

<b>Detailed breakdown</b>	<b>Percentage of indications</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
waiting	34.8%	85
returning to the stand	29.9%	73
specific time	33.2%	81
approximate time	22.5%	55
explanation of delay	13.9%	34
other	2.9%	7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>137.3%</b>	<b>335</b>

Source: research findings

Nearly half (49.6%) of trade fair visitors declare willingness to return to the stand at a later time when asked to do so. Interestingly, every fifth respondent in that group also asks to be contacted after the trade fair, which may be an attempt to secure contact in case they do not return to the stand. However, 16.4% decide against returning to the stand. The representatives of that group also fail to request contact after the trade fair. These customers are most probably lost for good.

### **Closing phase and Follow up**

At the end of the meeting the vendor should suggest further contact (39.3% of visitors) or do so at the customer's request (52.0%). The overwhelming majority (91.3%) of professional customers therefore expect the vendor to maintain contact after the trade fair meeting has ended.

Professional visitors also have strictly specified preferences regarding the form of such contact. Most often it is e-mail (74.6%) or telephone (54.5%), much less frequently traditional mail (10.2%) or a visit in person (7.8%). Regardless of the form, the biggest group of respondents believe that the follow-up contact should take place within seven days from the

meeting at the stand (50%), while a quarter of trade fair guests expect to be contacted within two weeks. The divergence of responses was substantial (from 2 to 60 days).

### ***Exhibitors***

The findings of the professional buyers' preferences survey were compared with the findings of the Mystery Visitor study. The response time of the stand personnel to an approaching visitor was short and did not exceed 5 minutes and 10 seconds (Table 6).

**Table 6. Exhibitor time to 1<sup>st</sup> contact**

<b>Detailed breakdown</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
In seconds	0	310	44.49	64.62
In minutes	0	5.17	0.74	1.08

Source: research findings

The vendors therefore do not exceed the time sensitivity for first contact in trade fair communication (Table 7), hence there are no grounds to dismiss hypotheses H1a.

**Table 7. Acceptable waiting time and actual performance (1<sup>st</sup> stage)**

<b>Detailed breakdown</b>	<b>Group</b>	
	<b>Visitor</b>	<b>Exhibitor</b>
up to 3 minutes	50.8%	88.9%
3-5 minutes	7.4%	1.6%
5-10 minutes	25.6%	4.2%
no expectations	9.5%	5.3%
time irrelevant	6.6%	0.0%

Source: research findings

However, it is worth noting that the potential waiting time of a professional visitor is longer than the tested exhibitor response.

**Table 8. Preferences regarding first contact and their fulfilment<sup>4</sup>**

<b>Detailed breakdown</b>	<b>Visitor</b>	<b>Exhibitor</b>
Being a specialist	53.7%	80.7%
Calling a specialist to the stand	30.7%	12.2%
Pointing to a specialist	16.0%	7.2%
Offering refreshments	6.1%	1.1%
Providing information about the company	29.1%	34.3%
Taking down contact data	10.7%	0.6%
No preferences	0.0%	3.3%

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 3 for a complete list of co-occurring preferences and types of behaviour.

<b>Total</b>	<b>146.3</b>	<b>139.2</b>
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Source: research findings

In all the most important areas (in terms of the buyers' preferences) the exhibitors' actions exceeded the potential expectations (contact with a specialist and providing information about the company, see Table 8). However, it should be noted that the vendors' representatives failed to take down the details of their interlocutors, which is the first signal of later problems with a follow-up.

**Table 9. Exhibitor time to 2<sup>nd</sup> contact**

Detailed breakdown	Average	Standard deviation	Mean	Max	Min
seconds	69.06	90.95	35	300	0
minutes	1.15	1.52	0.58	5.00	0.00

Source: research findings

**Table 10. Acceptable waiting time and actual performance (2<sup>nd</sup> stage)**

Detailed breakdown	Group	
	Visitor	Exhibitor
up to 3 minutes	50.8%	94.8%
3-5 minutes	7.4%	1.9%
5-10 minutes	25.6%	3.3%
no waiting	9.5%	n/a

Source: research findings

The findings regarding the time spent waiting for a specialist are even clearer than at the first stage. Holding talks with a specialist was not possible in 14 observations (due to pre-arranged meetings with other visitors).

**Table 11. Behaviour of the stand personnel when specialist unavailable**

Detailed breakdown	Giving waiting time in minutes	Giving approximate waiting time	Failing to specify waiting time	Total
Suggesting waiting	-	4	1	5
Suggesting coming back later	1	1	7	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>14</b>

Source: research findings

Again, we find that exhibitors far exceed visitors expectations of speed of service (Table 10). Yet they find it difficult to manage potential clients who cannot be served at the

moment. Even if a suggestion to return to the stand was made, staff failed to propose adequate time (Table 11). Thus we find support for hypothesis H2a but cannot support H2b.

Most of the visitors preferred exhibitors' personnel to offer and establish contact within two weeks after the trade fair (at the latest) by electronic mail. During each of mystery visits, exhibitors were asked to follow-up the contact by e-mail. The discrepancy between the expectations of professional buyers and vendor behaviour (Table 12) fails to provide grounds to adopt hypothesis H3a.

**Table 12. Expectations and behaviour of professional communicators in a contact domain after the meeting**

Expecting / offering the contact	Group	
	Visitor	Exhibitor
Yes	91.4%	54.8%
No	8.6%	45.2%

Source: research findings

After three weeks the e-mail boxes were checked. The gap between the exhibitor's declared intention to contact the visitor and the actual contact is even wider. Hardly any of the professional vendors maintained contact by sending an e-mail (Table 13).

**Table 13. Preferences towards keeping contact and their fulfilment**

Expecting / sending an e-mail after the meeting	Group	
	Visitor	Exhibitor
Yes	74.6%	1.8%
No	25.4%	98.2%

Source: research findings

There are therefore no grounds to positively verify hypothesis H3b.

## Summary and discussion

If a visitor wished to visit all stands in 10.5 hours, they would have to spend the average of less than 2 minutes at each stand. These figures illustrate how fierce the competition at the trade fair is and how strong the fight for the visitors' time, and, indirectly, how important communication prior to the trade fair is from the exhibitor's viewpoint (pre-arranged meetings, see Fig. 1).

**Table 14. Meeting communication preferences of professional buyers**

<b>Stage of communication process</b>	<b>1st stage time</b>	<b>1st stage behaviour</b>	<b>2nd stage time</b>	<b>2nd stage behaviour</b>	<b>Closing</b>	<b>Follow-up</b>
Meeting preferences of professional buyers	+	+(*)	+	-	-	-
Hypothesis	H1a	H1b	H2a	H2b	H3a	H3b
Positive verification	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

Source: research findings

Symbols:

+ preferences exceeded

= preferences met

- preferences not met

\* Note: except for taking down information on potential customer

The hypotheses regarding the first stage of the communication process were verified positively – professional vendors exceed the professional buyers’ preferences. However, the negatively verified hypotheses concerning the final stage of the communication process indicate that the exhibitors fail to seize the opportunities offered by meetings with prospective customers. (Table 14). Over 90% of professional visitors expect to be contacted after the trade fair. Meanwhile only a little over a half of the exhibitors surveyed (54.8%) suggested such contact. Thus it seems that the companies exhibiting at a trade fair mismanage their communication process. On the one hand we can witness overperformance in terms of first contact, while on the other hand we have significant underperformance in the last stage of the process. The obtained results may suggest that in this particular industry no great emphasis is placed on cultivating the communication process, and, from the very outset, the exhibitors are not geared towards taking down the contact details of the buyers (the already mentioned failure to record data upon a professional’s approach to the stand).

The wrong allocation of emphasis in the communication process may result in the vendors missing out on sales opportunities. With the view to complementing the conclusions presented herein, we also conducted an analysis of the differences in findings in terms of the purchase potential of different Mystery Visitor roles. The exhibitor’s internal analysis of that potential may have affected his/her willingness to maintain contact. However, the impact of the type of customer on the company representative’s approach to follow-up has been ruled out.

## **Limitations and future research**

Our study has some limitations among which the choice of roles and individuals playing those roles (students) should be mentioned. Although a multistage selection process was in place and the researchers underwent a few hours of training and were provided with attributes relevant for a given role (suitable clothing, briefcase, etc.), we cannot rule out potential researcher impact on vendor behaviour.

Another potential shortcoming is that we were able to investigate only one sector of industry. Thus the observed behaviour cannot be extrapolated to trade fair behaviour in general. Still we believe, it is deemed a good reflection of the behaviour in that particular sector because the years 2004-2007 were a period of economic boom in the furniture industry, hence the interest in new contacts could have been limited.

We would like to encourage other researchers to investigate trade fair communication and, possibly, validate our mystery visitor approach at other trade fairs.



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## Appendix 1. Mystery Visitor roles

feature	value		
	role 1 “apartment”	role 2 “house”	role 3 “guesthouse”
<b>needs</b>			
type of premises	apartment	house	guesthouse
size of premises in m2	55	200	800
acceptable price level	low	high	medium
preferred style	modern	modern	modern
delivery deadline	3-4 weeks	3-4 weeks	3-4 weeks
number of items	1	2-3	5-6
are the furniture items in question the same?	-	no	yes
quality	high	high	high
main purchase criterion	price	design	functionality
<b>purchase situation</b>			
who is this information intended for?	oneself	parents	owner

## Appendix 2. Mystery Visitor scenario

1. Approaching the stand’s reception desk

2a. If a staff member initiates dialogue, continue as indicated in your role.

2b. If within 30 seconds no one comes to the reception desk, please establish eye contact with a staff member closest to you. If that is not possible, approach them and say: “Good morning, I am interested in your range of products” and continue as indicated in your role.

If within 5 minutes no conversation is initiated with a person capable of solving your problem or if the waiting time given at the reception desk exceeds 5 minutes, please leave the stand.

4. Present your needs to the staff as indicated in your role

5-10. Difficult questions & problem handling section. In the course of the conversation the MV says “From what I have heard, your products are expensive”.

10. In the course of the conversation the MV requests references (a list of customers who have purchased a given product).

11. If the interlocutor suggests contact after the trade fair, give them the e-mail address provided with your role

12. If the interlocutor does not suggest contact after the trade fair, then the MV says: “Can I expect your company to contact me after the trade fair?” (objective: eliciting the interlocutor’s response and a promise of a follow-up). If the interlocutor suggests contact after the trade fair, give them the e-mail address provided with your role

13. Saying goodbye and leaving the stand.

14. Answering questions in the questionnaire.

### **Appendix 3. Preferences and behaviours for first stage contact**

The table below presents a detailed breakdown of visitor preferences and exhibitor behaviour. A number with a few digits indicates the co-occurrence of several elements. Each digit indicates the occurrence of a response (or event) listed in the table of response indices. For instance: 1 means only “being a specialist”, whereas 25 means “calling a specialist to the stand and providing information about the company”.

Indices:

1. Personal service (specialist)
2. Calling a specialist to the stand
3. Pointing to a person to continue conversation with
4. Offering refreshments
5. Providing materials about the company
6. Taking down contact details

Index	Visitors (%)	Exhibitors (%)
1	38.5%	50.3%
2	13.1%	5.5%
3	8.2%	4.4%
25	6.6%	2.8%

15	6.1%	26.5%
5	4.5%	1.7%
23	4.5%	0.0%
156	4.1%	0.0%
256	2.0%	0.0%
14	1.6%	0.0%
16	1.6%	0.0%
24	1.2%	0.0%
145	1.2%	0.6%
2345	1.2%	0.0%
6	0.8%	0.0%
35	0.8%	0.0%
56	0.8%	0.0%
12	0.4%	0.0%
26	0.4%	0.0%
236	0.4%	0.6%
245	0.4%	0.0%
255	0.4%	0.0%
345	0.4%	0.0%
356	0.4%	0.0%
7	0.0%	3.3%
13	0.0%	0.6%
34	0.0%	0.6%
123	0.0%	0.6%
125	0.0%	2.2%
235	0.0%	0.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%