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ENHANCING SME COMPANIES VISIBILITY FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS IN NATIONAL EXHIBITION EVENTS FINNBUILD 2018 EXHIBITION EXPERIENCE REPORT

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FINNBUILD 2018 EXHIBITION EXPERIENCE REPORT

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FOREWORDS

This project report discusses on experiences and ideas for SME companies' possibilities to add into their visibility in the eyes of foreigner visitors. The ideas and experiences have been built on top of exhibition experiences coming from Finnbuild 2018 field study point of view. The report has been written for all Finnish SME companies to consider how they show up themselves for foreigners when participating into different events and exhibitions, that might receive foreigners as visitors. From non-native persons point of view, even a small hint of familiarity and text and visual material in their "native language" and in familiar visual form, gives them a reason to slow down and interpret with little additional time, would this particular company offer something in their interests.

For this project work and possibility to write this report, we would like to express our gratitude for the Regional Council of South Karelia for founding the Digi Booster project (as part of the other funded Alueelliset innovaatiot ja kokeilut (AIKO) projects). In addition to the Regional Council, we would like to offer our gratitude for the companies that participated into this project, as without their help and insight in the field studies, building of the report would have not been possible. The open and creative discussions with the companies, and positive attitude towards field studies has helped to reveal some of the basic things that most companies should still upgrade in their public presence.

Finally, we would like to thank LUT University for providing the possibility to work within this most interesting topic areas as a part of this digitalization and international markets focused project work.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, exhibitions can be one of the best ways for SMEs to promote their innovative business offerings to acquire/invite/attract new interested international buyers, to meet other players in the industry they operate and to facilitate learning process how companies in similar industry areas are presenting their offerings and promoting their excellence. By seeing all of these in one day a company can get new ideas and enrich its vision **how** to promote own products to international buyers, **what** international buyers are actually looking for and **how** their needs and expectations might differ from national buyers' one.

Referring to the Centre for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR), it is said that 70 % of the exhibition visitors are planning to buy one or more products, whilst 26 %, actually, sign purchase orders there. Speaking about attendances' buying decisions, 72% of visitors claim that trade shows influence on their buying decisions. (Leybovich 2012) Moreover, exhibitions and trade shows are considered as meaningful marketing tools which have a direct impact on company's local and global market competitiveness (Kellezi 2014, p. 467). On the one hand, one could say that tradeshow can easily become an important form of the product and service promotion tool for SMEs striving to get a place in international business, but, on the other hand, these exhibitions and participation into them demand money and resources from SMEs. So, when one does participate into an event like this, multiple aspects of product and service presentation should be considered with time and great efforts to get the corresponding return for invested resources: the way how the event booth is set, how information is layout out, what is stated in marketing materials and so on. In short, when SME targets at internationalization and new foreign markets, it can be advised to maximize the value of the exhibition with further preparation of company's exhibition performance for internationals visits. Specially, in Finland, where it still seems to be

the case, that many companies do most of their promotions with native purchasers in mind, but for an international exhibition “wonderer” those few companies that have maximally considered international visitors, what, in turn, means that their promotion booth will definitely stand up compared to what their competitors offer. As analogue to supply chains, you need to collaborate with all the key players in the supply chain to achieve the best end results (Salmela et al., 2011), in exhibitions, your key player is your potential customer, with whom you need to be able to communicate clearly.

In this sense, this report is based on the practical field research to the Finnish biggest exhibition centre Messukeskus. The FinnBuild exhibition was used as an example to see how the construction industry related companies’ product and service promotion did feel and look like for international visitor, and how one could learn from the companies who promoted themselves in the positive light (from the point of visitor’s view of easiness to go and learn more in the booth). With this experience, *this report has a goal to provide the practical guidance for Finnish SMEs with simple explanations how they could easily attract little bit more international visitors’ time and interest into their exhibition stands in trade exhibition events like this and other similar events.* In this manner, the most important lesson learnt from the FinnBuild exhibition field study are presented as chapters of this report combining several ideas for SMEs to add them visibility in exhibitions for international visitors.

The ideas gathered in this report come from on the field analysis and interpretation of other exhibition visitors’ actions and reactions near and inside the exhibition booths. The work presented in this report is done as a part of the project looking for ways to support Finnish SME companies to internationalize and, in this particular context, we looked for events like FinnBuild kept in the Messukeskus exhibition centre on the 11th of October 2018. For reader’s information, Messukeskus is the largest event venue in Finland with the exhibition place of 58.000 m² in 7 exhibition halls attracting each year over one million visitors with 75 trade exhibitions (Messukeskus 2019a) and offering

great heart-warming service and versatile facilities for enabling continues business networking (Messukeskus 2016). Messukeskus also welcomes international exhibition participants and visitors providing not only easy access location close to the centre of Helsinki and central Pasila station, but also the English language on-site service and website guidance (Messukeskus 2019b). Additionally, as the Finnish main airport (Helsinki-Vantaa) is just a short local train trip away from Messukeskus, one can easily see why this exhibition centre is probably the best place to attract international visitors. Looking at the amounts of visitors, Messukeskus alone attracts roughly 1,1 to 1,2 million visitors every year, as the following visualisation on the Figure 1 (based on sources: Messukeskus 2015, Messukeskus 2017, STT Info 2018 and STT Info 2019) shows.



Figure 1. Yearly exhibitions visitors in Messukeskus from 2010 to 2018.

Additionally for a reader, one should note that this report does not concern with any analysis of the pre-marketing planning campaign or follow up exhibition performance

results. For the full-blown exhibition coverage, one should also look these essential components of exhibition excellence and trade show marketing related tactics (FORZA 2014, p. 3, p. 10). In this particular report, we discuss real practical pragmatic experiences that were gathered from this particular exhibition, as it is seen by the field researchers. The examples and ideas presented in this report are based on field researchers' experience on the event and the interpretations of the researchers about the nearby visiting customers' reactions towards different tactics, which the exhibition participating companies were using in this particular event. Authors were looking the exhibition as visitor experience point of view, but also trying to spot, were the most typical and nowadays a lot discussed digitalization (Kortelainen and Happonen, 2017; Kortelainen et al. 2019) and personalised & customized product designs (Piili et al., 2013; Widmaier et al., 2013), robotization and automatization related aspects already widely present in this particular buildings related exhibition. Also we were interested, has the 10 years old construction industry related research directions (Porras et al., 2006; Kallonen et al., 2007; Hämäläinen et al., 2008) been nowadays already implemented in practical world applications and if yes, how would these be present in exhibition.

2. COMPANY'S STAND DESIGN TO ATTRACT MORE VISITORS

In the following parts of this report, researchers' experiences and observations are used to give options and ideas for SMEs to facilitate international participants' visits by looking at the exhibition booths from an international customers' point of view and expressing different kinds of actions SME companies can easily do to draw international visitors' attention.

2.1. Using the English language in visible ways

One of the basic cornerstones of welcoming international English-speaking visitors to a company stand is to create corresponding and familiar environment for them. In this particular case, we are speaking about translating company's information, product and service descriptions to short and easily digested packets for the exhibition use (such as booklets, products information boards, etc.) into English. Lots of companies did have English material available, if a visitor did know where to look. When international visitors come to Finland for the first time, they usually do not have that luxury. For them everything is little bit off compared to their own cultural experiences. So, for SME companies it just means that they need to put the English slogans, short translations and expressions of their offerings in locations that are "in your face", in so obvious locations that one cannot miss them at all (e.g. a big arrow in the corridor floor with the text "we speak English" or a sign hanging over a booth with the British flag and text "we invite international visitors" etc.) So, SMEs should really pay attention to this issue, if they want to internationalize their exhibition stand as this is one of the most obvious and basically quite straight forward easy-to-implement approach.



Figure 2. Exhibition guidances.

Also, SME companies should put themselves in the “international visitors’ shoes”. For example, when one walked into the exhibition centre to the FinnBuild exhibition, it was obvious we arrived at the Finnish exhibition centre and not that much 100% fully international exhibition centre. Some text was in English, but the biggest weigh was in the local language (see the Figure 2). What it means for an international visitor, who is unfamiliar with the Messukeskus premises, finding particular company booth is a challenge in all 7 halls because of the building design. So, when SME companies decide the booth location to attract and invite international visitors and partners to come to their booth location, they should consider an easily reachable location for a visitor from some particular incoming points. It is true, that there are the Messukeskus related maps available, but for all reality, even some native people seem to find it extremely hard to navigate with those. So, SMEs should take care on their company booth location selection and stay away from places that they cannot give advices for visitors to get into easily by using simple directions that even a novice can easily follow.

Then returning to this language issue, as an example, the following pictures (the Figure 3) were taken from the exhibition from the walking corridors, as they were seen by an international visitor, for whom, the boards text that was easily visible was all in Finnish. For a visitor it gave a sign, that this company and its people in the booth might also communicate only by using the Finnish language. Even if the company might have text translated into English and materials available in English in its stand, the company will lose visitors as they already made their judgement call that was not the case and walked away.



Figure 3. Exhibitions stands information in Finnish.

So, to learn from the researchers' interpretation and noted possibility of losing international visitors, a company would probably want to make its exhibition booth appealing to internationals to stop and to come to this stand by indicating the languages company representatives can and will gladly speak, for example, by hanging Finnish and U.K. flags somewhere at an easily seen "high up" place (like on the ceiling in the Figure 4), so anyone who sees the flags could get interested and come to site, maybe, even the first coming just will wonder and ask what these flags are for and what they mean.

As for the practical test, our international visitor did go into some of the booths that seemed to have some materials in English. In this exhibition the situation was as follows. When this visitor did come into the stand and asked a question in English, company representatives either spoke English directly or called another company representative who could or did prefer to speak English. In the exhibition there were the maximum of 3 people from all companies' representatives in the big exhibition hall, who completely had to find someone else to speak English to allow the discussions to flow forward. As for the international visitor, this did give the first impression that the most companies did not have easily seen English material available, but it does not mean they did not communicate in English. This is something a novice visitor would not know and would easily pass by.



Figure 4. Example of language flags hung in a company's stand.

Additionally, one could put language abbreviations like ENG, FIN, RUS and etc. into marketing posters, as there are easily understood by the most industrial personnel anyway (the Figure 5). Additionally, putting them into the right upper corner, in the similar manner as a company would put languages in its websites allows a company to promote s familiar look and feel, that as intuitive meaning for the people who reads these poster materials.

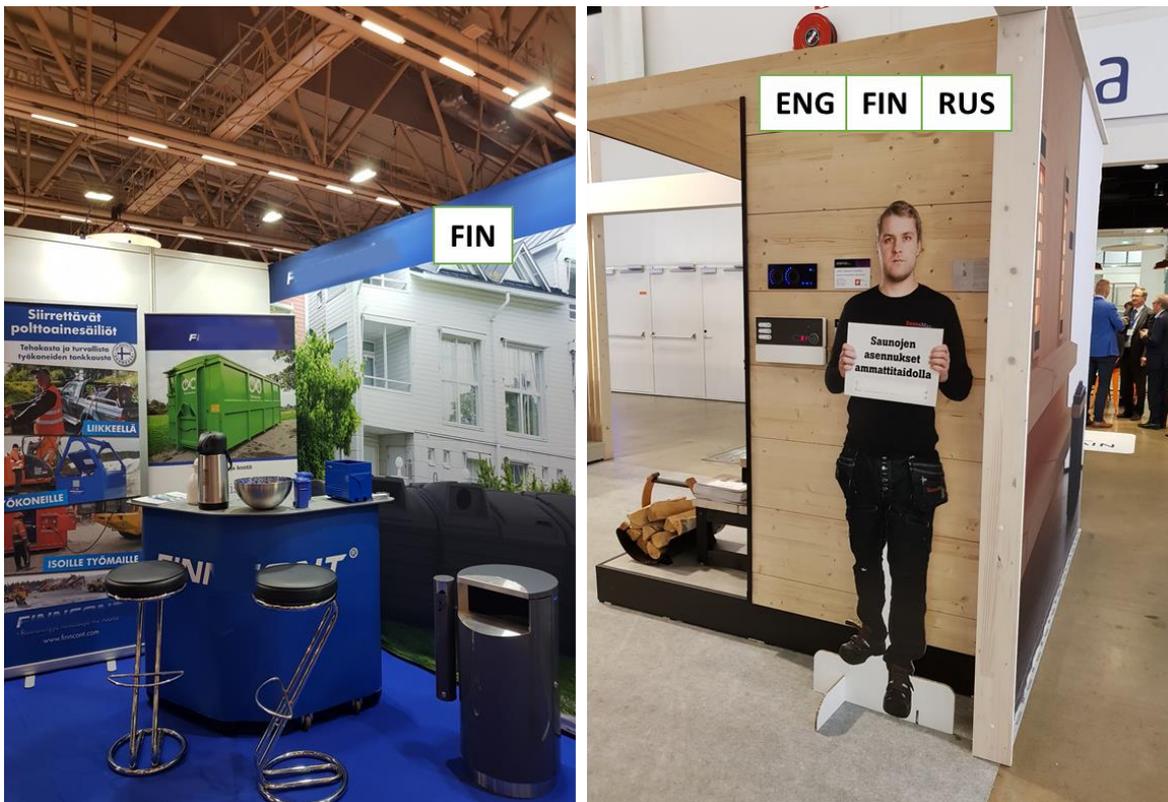


Figure 5. Examples of language signs put on posters.

2.2. Providing self-study way materials

In order to avoid the international visitors' possible language barrier, some companies did use promotional videos to a) stop people to see what is going on and b) to explain their products and/or service offerings with less words and more with visual materials.

In this visualisation context, many companies had things like videos and prints, but somehow e.g. miniaturised versions of their products were not really present in the event. Many companies of course had some of their products present, but the space is limited and we do know people prefer to have “tangible” experience with products. In this sense, companies could consider for example 2D laser cut (Happonen et al., 2015) and 3D formed models (Piili et al, 2013) or 3D printing as a way to generate miniaturised models for large scale show of around their product designs and product size variations. In video material side, one exhibition booth presented a good example of animated short video (the Figure 6 with follow up pictures) that did not require the visitor to use any languages at all to understand the message which the short video computing products end user benefits told about.

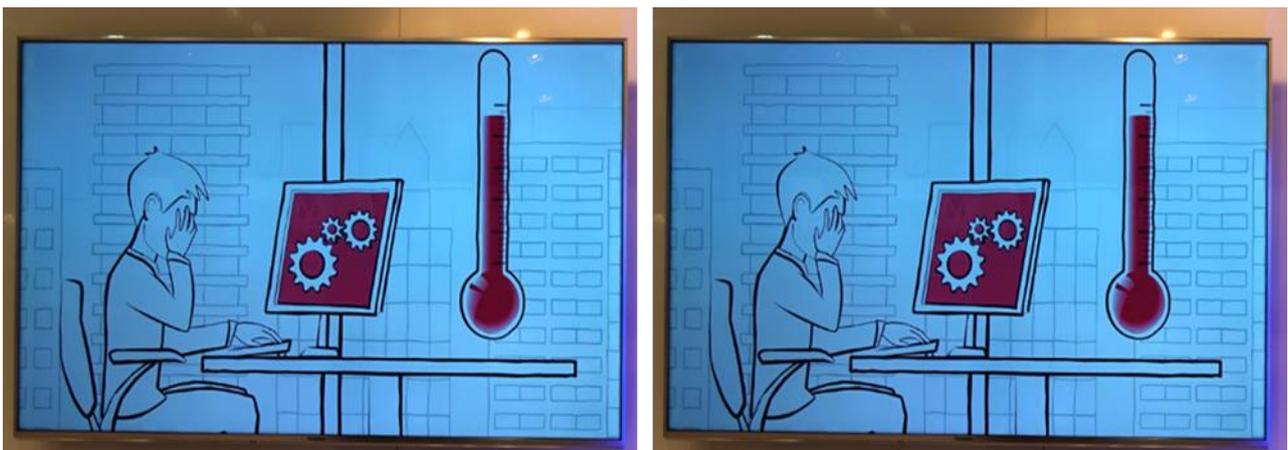


Figure 6. Video explaining heating ceiling principle to visitors.

After watching many company booths with videos and how effectively those did catch people’s attention, one can easily state that it is highly recommended in a company’s stand to use a short eye-catching video played in a continuous loop (see more on the topic in Nomadic Display n.d., p. 8). These videos are perfect excuse for a visitor to come up with some natural and interesting questions to ask from the companies’ representatives (DSA Ltd. n.d., p. 7). Or in case if company’s stand representatives are

busy a visitor has something meaningful to do, when they wait for their time to talk, by watching an entertainment video for a while.

The short-animated video, mentioned previously, was a video that did presents a use case related to the company products from the point of view of a person in office building who is working conditions and is positively affected by the products. The presentation video was built in the simplified animated video format that did not have any special “effect” or anything similar “unnecessary additions”. It was focusing to the main point, it was quite short and made clear what was going. And the best part of all, was the fact that the video was made so, that a visitor got the point almost in the time it took to just slowly walk by the booth in slow steady way moving along with other people having some discussions. The whole video took around 30 seconds to a minute maximum.

The idea of using a presentation video going in a loop was present in other companies stands too (e.g. see the Figure 7).



Figure 7. Video with the previous installation done by a company.

However, there were many possibilities for multiple companies to improve such videos, especially, when they are looked from the international perspective. For instance, by putting a small background accompanying audio or scrolling text in English explaining what is happening in a video (as most videos were targeted to Finnish customers at the moment). Also, graphics, logos and icons should be used in these videos to replace written text as that helps to re-use them in multiple different language contexts in the future. However, if some text is used, a company should consider serving international customers with some additions like subtext (e.g. same material in YouTube etc. that support different language translations with subtexts). Additionally, when a company's marketing video from sources like YouTube presented in the exhibitions and this company offers e.g. 2D bar code to get a visitor directly to this video too, it is super easy for exhibition visiting people to a) find more similar interesting videos from this company, b) use more time in the booth to talk to company related to things they are interested about and c) promote for and share this video with others who are interested about the same topics (free marketing support). And, of course, better is the video, less the company people will be using their time to explain same things to multiple people again and again in multiple exhibition days (practically being able to move basic learning part to "self-learning" mode for participants themselves).

2.3. Designing visitors welcoming stand layout

To start with, a company who wants to improve their visibility against the competitors needs to pay attention to design of the exhibit marketing message to achieve the memorable wow effect (DSA Ltd. n.d., p. 6). Specially as the first impression is so important, a company stand should attract visitors in open and easy access way (MFV Expositions 2007, p. 5).

As a practical example from the case event, one company designed its booth to have clear open layout. This open layout with h letter shaped tv stands placed at the two outer corners of the company exhibition made it really easy for any potential interested visitor to come and was informative showing visitor's eye appealing headlines (the Figure 8).



Figure 8. Welcoming h-shaped company's stand.

This sort of approach is working well and is also a sort of recommend placing to create curiosity for visitors to see what this company offers and then to approach this booth too. On the contrary, the design of the stand was sort of two-edge sword. As on the positive side, in the areas people flowed by the stand (MFV Expositions. 2007, p. 5). But yet, it was too easy for visitors just to stay out from the insides of the company stand and so they would not step into the company's exhibition area at all. Compared to some other approaches, for bigger company stands like these, it could be useful to pull the video TVs little bit more inside the company stand area to help to pull the visitors inside the area too. Additionally, companies should consider originality, ways of presenting their offering and ways of being authentic too, which then should differentiate them from other competing neighbours (MFV Expositions 2007, p. 5; DSA Ltd. n.d., p. 5-8). In this sense, this stand of this case company was unique and

distinctive from its near competitors in this exhibition. In fact, we did not find any other company with exactly the same or near similar layout.

Other two examples of nice companies' stand shapes inviting visitors to the company's exhibition area are shown in the following Figure 9. Both of these were found to be distinctive and original for these companies only. The house shaped stand looked attractive for foreigners' eyes since a visitor could easily understand that this company designed something for home or at least their products are directly home related.

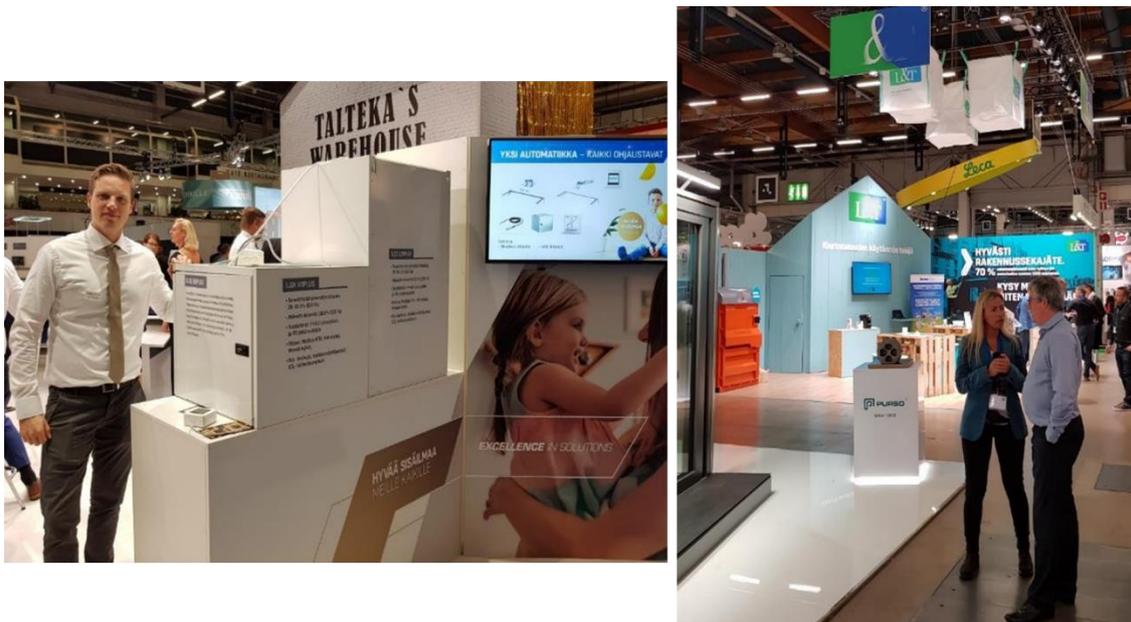


Figure 9. Ladder info stand (left), house shaped stand (right).

Moreover, going through this exhibition, it was noticed that some companies used product walls that not only showed their products, but that also were clearly designed, so they did not block the view to the booth insides. This case the company stands themselves were a clear and gave an open look and feel, delivering these companies a good advantage compared to more traditional approaches used. The example is from an open wall structure from a company demonstrating cranes equipment (shown in the Figure 10 below). This structure presented the products but did not block view to the

booth area itself. At the same time, this shelving is one of the key design elements allowing customers to interact with companies' products and demonstrate them (Nimlok 2017, p. 5).



Figure 10. Open wall stand structures.

It was a definite plus that some companies showed samples of their products too. For example, like it was with the following company in the below Figure 11. The left pictures demonstrate company's various ceiling panels in different colours and surface finish conditions. However, as there were some infrared camera solution providers in this exhibition too shown in the right picture, and we did notice a lot of attention towards those solutions from customers' walk, this particular company (with heating and cooling solutions) might want to look for possibilities to have collaboration with them in the future exhibitions. For any SME company, considering exhibitions in general and ways to attract more local, native and international visitors alike, this sort of nearby booth collaboration would be a win-win for both companies. Infrared product company can use the heating and cooling company's products as demonstration targets

and the heating and cooling equipment can steer their visitors to infrared product company's direction to see how well their product outputs heat / sucks heat inside.



Figure 11. Companies could have cooperated for marketing each other products.

Even further, exhibition partners could use clear signs to make visitors to note the next location where to go to see something they might be interested to hear more (the Figure 12). Generally, any marketing partners building stands in this sort of big events / exhibitions will definitely have more added possible visitors counted in a day.

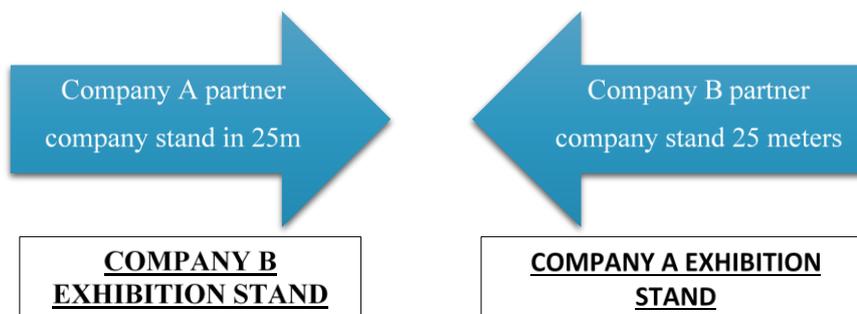


Figure 12. Exhibition arrows to a partner's stand.

Related to company partners, at least in this exhibition, it was sort of strange to find out that so many companies speak and promote global / international collaboration and partners in different countries, but that does not show up in their company booth. There were few exceptions, like in Figure 8, it can be seeing that the company is promoting university collaboration, and in fact the university is actually presenting in the same booth area too. But in general companies seem to put all effort to focus on themselves in the event, and that sort of is not in the lines with their collaboration speeches. There is lot to gain from true collaboration, like we have had in Unviersity – Company borderlines (Happonen and Minashkina, 2018) and we believe all companies who have different kinds of fruitful collaboration models should also promote those in events like this one.

3. COMPANY'S PRODUCTS & SERVICES ILLUSTRATION IN EASILY APPROACHABLE WAYS

One of the key functions companies' stand areas are mainly (nearly 60%) focusing for is typically for product samples display (Rinallo et al. 2010, p. 251). Whereas, the stand place should not be only focusing on product shows / performance presentations, but also for entertaining visitors (Power, D., & Jansson, J. 2008, p. 11). If one company can combine its product presentation and an entertaining factor, a visitor shall stay longer time in this stand. Additionally, it is always an advantage for the company, if they can demonstrate their products and a visitor can also test this product / service by themselves in the live situation at the exhibition. Especially, speaking about international visitors in an exhibition, they might not always have the ability to grasp the whole product idea at once (with one short explanation). In these situations, the practical experience could fill up the gaps, one misses from spoken explanation. So, it is always a big plus to any company, but, especially, for those who have less know brand to offer practical experience for the visitors. Because the actual product/services experience can tell visitors more than thousand words do and at the same time testing can attract visitors and entertain them. And, additionally, when people make practical interactions with company products, they usually like to take pictures / send Instagram notes etc. to their work colleagues. In a sense, this is most efficient and basically free product promotion for the companies, offered by the people who participate into the "hands on" demonstrations and experience possibilities. As for this particular event, we are going to list some examples in following. These examples are pointed out, as for many of them, there was either a line of people waiting to participate and/or we did hear sounds of joy coming up, when people did participate.

- ✓ Ventilation specialist company had installed a cooking unit in their company stand. This unit demonstrated the power of extracting ventilations, demonstrating the company's strong expertise in the field and the cooks there were actually honoured chefs (the Figure 13 below). The tasty cent of freshly cooked food was easily picked up from small distance away and visitors who waited nearby were served with small sample dishes. At the same time, the company people had their possibility to talk to visitors and find out their knowledge and interests towards products like these one.



Figure 13. Filters demonstration by companies.

- ✓ The second company had really tangible hands on experience to offer (the Figure 14). They used miniature sized building blocks in their competition, that participants could use to build construction by the rules of competition. The thing is that these blocks were shaped as the company products were, which gave nice discussions starting point for the company people in this stand. Also, for the visitor

this experience was really pleasant, and the product features did come somewhat more familiar with the competition.



Figure 14. Example of easily building installation.

- ✓ To continue with this seeing action experience theme, the next example comes from the shower equipment side. This company had installed running water equipment in their booth. These shower equipment's did demonstrate company's products installed on walls and table tops, which allowed visitors to turn them on and have practical look and feel experience. Also, smart control system was available for testing, which kind of gave the visitors little bit something new, compared to

traditional shower equipment (what did seem to get a lot of attention from visitors) (the Figure 15)).

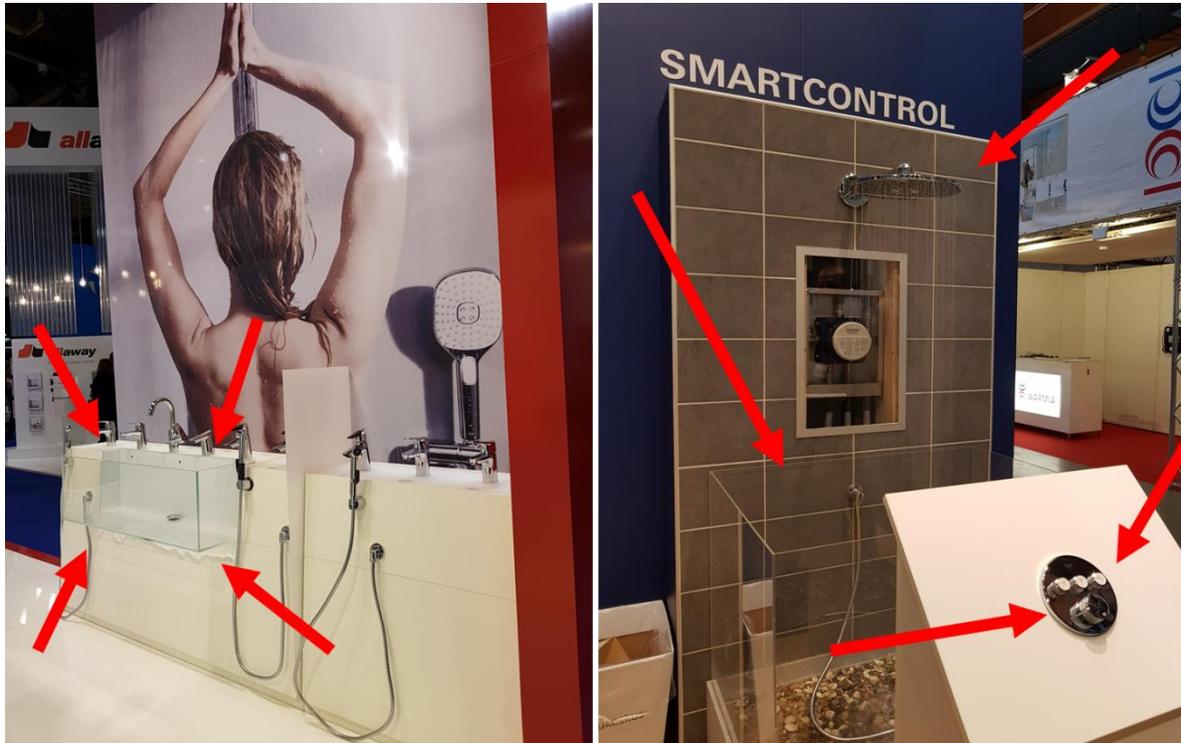


Figure 15. Examples how visitors can try different showers.

- ✓ From a more practical point of view, the following example comes from the company, that e.g. promoted their new patented screw design among many other things. In this particular case, they did give visitors a chance to try their patented screw and standard screws in real mounting action. This possibility did give everyone the chance to “feel the difference” and that really did seem to convince many visitors to give some idea, what kind of screws their installation team, actually, uses, especially, in difficult installation places. The action itself did happen into wooden stands, where this company had installed the test set and there each

visitor could try out their new patented screws with battery powered drills (the Figure 16 (left)).

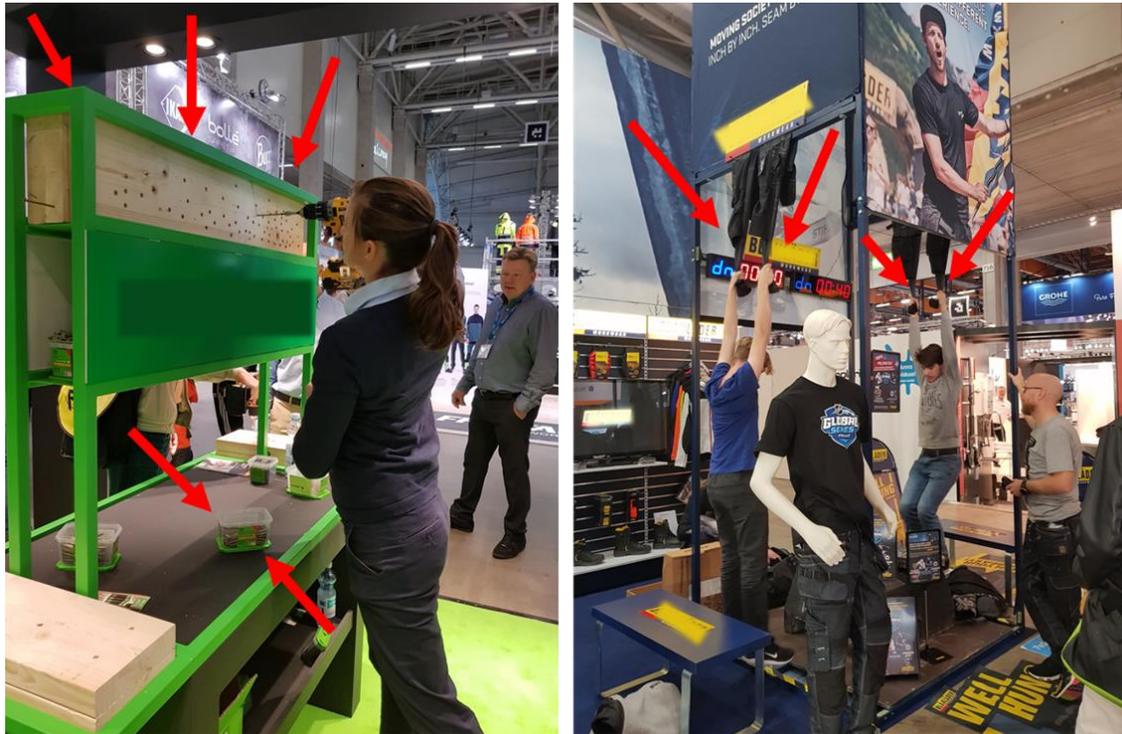


Figure 16. Screw testing (left), safety clothes promotion competition (right).

- ✓ Another way of making people to joy themselves taking clearly quite long time in the company booth were these competitions which were designed to measure the time one could do the given competition action. This particular company made the visitors to compete against each other and with the clock at the same time. The competition was to test whether one was able to hang one minute in a pole or not (this was a manufacturer of safety gear). The hanging action happened by testing companies' safe clothing, which was wrapped up and around pull up bars. The people who joined to the test were competing to hold

themselves for a one minute in the air by just using their hands' power to win the competition prizes (the Figure 16 (right)).

When we looked these different participation and competition models companies offered, those seemed to be heavily leaning into the direction of getting the visitors come and stay near by the booth. There is clear marketing and “connecting with a visitor” point of view for doing this, but on another hand companies were missing out many busy visitors, who did not have time to wait to be able to get into the booth. For this challenge, companies should consider electronic tools with easily given access for visitors to leave their interest to be contact by the company in near future. For example by printing out big 2D code to 1) participate into the company competition and to ask to be contacted later on with things X and Y plus, 2) including company products and services learning material links inside the company competition questions, SME companies could collect additional leads from events like this one. Additionally, in the end of the competition and contact details collection, as sign of gratitude for participation, the company could share small packet of self learning materials around company offerings as educational and promotional “gift” (Hämäläinen et al., 2007).

4. CONCLUSION

As final conclusions, relying on the exhibition experiences from the international visitor's point of view, many of the ideas presented in this document should be truly easily grasped by any Finnish SME company going into events like these to get more international visitors' time and interest towards companies' product and/or service offerings. The concepts and ideas are based on findings done in the live situation in the exhibition centre Messukeskus, but they should be quite easily modified to any similar event. One just needs to take into account the surroundings, assumed typical visitors and probably a little bit about the considered cultural environment, the event shall be happening. One particular side note we would like to point out about Messukeskus is that this particular exhibition centre has been founded in October 1919, so this year (2019) will be an anniversary celebration of 100 years for this event and exhibition centre (Messukeskus 2019c). Celebrations in general and round years like this one special year for this exhibition centre should bring in more people than have been there ever before, surely, few things will be done differently than were in any previous years.

As interesting side note, as this exhibition was construction industry related one, we did notice ICT related fact, which was sort of unexpected. The thing is that, already in the middle of 1990s and 2000s there was lots of discussions, signs in industry and publications (Porras et al., 2006) that ICT would come fast and hard into the context of construction industry and as such would revolutionize it. Until now, almost 25 years later, it starts to seem that the majority of the companies have some sort of IT related twist in their products and digitalization is in its way to change this industry (Kortelainen and Happonen, 2017), which some call "traditional". For instance, in this particular case study exhibition, a company used VR glasses to demonstrate their products (heating tiles) outlook in installation, e.g. when the light conditions will change in the house, during the day.

And finally, all of our field observations can be united into one message for SMEs going as a golden thread in this report of making themselves more noticeable for international visitors. As a short summary of abovementioned, using these field study findings, many SME sized company could easily attract more English-speaking visitors with simple rethinking of their event actions, modifying their exhibition booth layout, material presentations and creating a little bit more inviting environment (for outsiders who do not know the company and/or its products from any previous contacts). Briefly, providing visitors with the English language materials and building welcoming surrounding to support “exploring” curious international visitors should end up naturally wondering to company booth and engaging company people with discussions.

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