

# MID-YEAR PERSPECTIVE: TRADE SHOWS & B-TO-B EVENTS

Some of the world's most prolific trade show exhibitors and b-to-b marketers talk shop in our annual mid-year roundtable

Wondering what's shaking across some of the biggest and busiest trade show and event departments on the planet? You are not alone—which is why, for our annual mid-year executive roundtable, we assembled seven of the industry's leading trade show and event executives to discuss the state of the industry, what's happened in 2017 and what's coming in 2018.

From paradigm-shifting trade show strategies to surviving the worldwide venue shortage to consolidating global portfolios, our participants shared their candid

perspectives on what's working, what's not and what's keeping them up at night. Despite the challenges at hand, it was anything but a venting session. Moderated by EM content director Jessica Heasley and coproduced with leading agency Sparks (wearesparks.com), these guys came ready to share *solutions*.

So read on for a taste of our lively discussion, and listen in as these b-to-b gurus share how they're taking some of the industry's biggest pain points (we're sure you know the ones) and transforming them into areas of opportunity.

## ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS:



**Luca Balbo**  
*Director-Global Events*  
**Microsoft**



**Laura Bell Way**  
*Senior Manager-Global  
Customer Events*  
**Autodesk**



**Barb Cyrus**  
*Senior Program Manager-  
Global Conferences & Events*  
**IBM**



**Alice Hines**  
*Experiential Marketing  
Manager*  
**Activision**



**Alix Mills**  
*Head of Global Events*  
**Bloomberg**



**Ben Nazario**  
*Senior VP*  
**Sparks**



**Bridget O'Brien**  
*Director of Marketing*  
**Intuit**

**EM:** *We are seeing a lot of consolidation and reorganization across global portfolios right now. Most of you oversee global events and trade shows—what are some of the biggest challenges and subsequent changes you're seeing in that space?*

**BARB CYRUS:** I've been the lead for the last four years of our regional cross-IBM events. About four years ago our marketing executive team said, "You know, we can't keep killing the geographies by asking them to take content from all of our global conferences and hold separate events at very prescriptive times throughout the year." There were six or eight of those brand-specific conferences at that time. And not only that, we can't keep talking only to the same people—the current clients. We've got to bring new clients into the pipeline.

So now I manage this event strategy like a program. We get a budget, we create assets, we create standard messaging, we create content, we even have a live content library where they download presentations, or roundtable concepts, or panel guidance. And then we make it available to the geographies for implementation of the strategy.

We set targets that said they had to have primarily new contacts, or new responders. We have a variety of definitions of how we measure "new," but we started at an average of maybe 20 percent, and now we're up over 50 consistently. Some are even as high as 80 percent new. We gave them separate "earmarked" budgets to ensure the investment in "new" was there. So it was really managed from worldwide or corporate as a program. We took all these disparate things and centralized them. So now it's a consistent strategy across the whole company.

**ALIX MILLS:** It's self-serve.

**BC:** That's the idea. We also had to change our way of thinking. We established relationships and really collaborative ways of helping [the geographies] do these events. But they were responsible for the execution. Culturally, they have to do different things. So I can say, "Here's your objectives, here's what we're trying to accomplish, here's some assets that can help you," so everyone around the world doesn't reinvent the wheel and duplicate costs.

**AM:** You created the "event in the box," which I'm always asked to do.

**BC:** And interestingly enough, now that we're going back to a single global conference, they will package that and make it portable and scalable right from the beginning—instead of a separate team having to synthesize it all from all those other eight events. I've really learned to put on the lens of the geographies so much more than I ever did before. [Some activations] work great when you're in Las Vegas and you do it one time. But we can't just give it to South Africa. So, that's one of our biggest challenges.

**LAURA BELL WAY:** We've got 14 events around the globe and we operate in a similar way to give corporate assets and also technologies that they might need. But then it's operated at a level locally that's relevant for that audience.

**AM:** Our team manages the strategy, planning and execution of 2,800 events, some as small as 10 and some as large as 14,000, for clients, prospects, global influencers and employees. We are a

centrally managed team sitting across 14 offices, seven countries globally with the largest teams in New York and London and the smallest in Dubai, Beijing, Shanghai and Mumbai. The major benefit of a centrally managed team is the ability to deliver globally consistent events, but that's only successful if you leave room for localization. The content, messaging and creative need to be locally relevant, but globally consistent to measure a global program or series of events. We've had success using global frameworks of consistency that then allow for localization at any level. This also allows the teams, in any country, a sense of ownership. We can manage a global series with the same creative and messaging that delivers an experience relevant to an audience in Singapore, San Francisco, São Paulo... all different, but really the same.

**ALICE HINES:** Our basic goal and challenge is to create excitement about our games, not necessarily our overall company. We have new games coming out every year. They might be within the same franchise, but it's always a new game that we're trying to create excitement about. And that's globally throughout the world. I agree with everybody here about the global—it's difficult. There's a different culture in South America versus North America versus Canada. So, yeah, I think that's a great challenge. And we have people playing our games globally, so you can get on and play Call of Duty with somebody in India, or Russia or South Africa and beyond.

**EM:** *How has your trade show and event organization and the infrastructure of your portfolios changed to keep pace with the industry and your respective markets?*

**AM:** When I started at Bloomberg seven years ago, events were managed and executed team by team, city by city, business by business, in a very siloed nature. We've spent a great deal of effort evolving into an event marketing organization by working collaboratively across market management, creative, digital and content teams, all part of Bloomberg Marketing. Running strategic, connected programs not only delivers stronger results for the business, but it creates opportunity for our team of event planners. They can see a career in events beyond planning and execution allowing us to develop and retain our talent. We are, in effect, an internal agency that plans, produces and executes a majority of our events internally, but, on occasion, we leverage our regional agency partnerships for seasonal spikes, specialized skills or location.

To create an event marketing team, we evolved from ad-hoc to repeatable and then managed event programs. We created tools, process and most importantly data that supported the conversations and influenced informed decision-making. It's hard to argue with the facts that Y-O-Y data creates. Our biggest challenge is to continue to connect the dots across the businesses and encourage them to tell an audience-centric Bloomberg story. Internal organizational structures make this a challenge. Each of the businesses has their own initiatives, priorities and targets. It's hard for them to take a step back and trust that a consolidated program will tell a stronger story to the audience and deliver results meeting multiple businesses priorities. Because marketing supports the whole company, we have a unique perspective that allows us to see the big picture. We are always aiming to help the businesses integrate and even eliminate programs that are targeting the same audience with a similar message in the same regional proximity.

**LUCA BALBO:** For us it's a mosaic, really, because you have those large events that we run as a business, where we are responsible for generating revenue. So, in those cases we do own completely the demand generation and all these aspects. In other instances, there may be in-country events where we rely on the local team and we make them responsible for attracting audiences. And in other instances, the event is part of a nurture program and is part of the marketing motion. So, there's not a single straightforward answer. We have that accountability, but by no means for all our events.

**BEN NAZARIO:** It's interesting to watch how this industry has changed and grown. How the objectives in what we did 25 years ago and what we're doing today are unbelievably different—and it makes so much sense if you step back and look at it all. In some ways it's easier, but in some ways it's a lot harder. We're always learning. Every event that we work on, whether it's Google I/O or CES, we look at what's happening and how the audience is behaving to help us to learn and dictate what we'll do next. It's a good process for us.

**EM:** *Let's talk about some of the trends that are heating up or cooling down in the trade show space. Are you exhibiting more or less than you used to?*

**AM:** I think the thing that has gotten more and more challenging for third party events is that most of the time you can represent your brand better without competing for share of voice. And, so few actually deliver the audiences we are targeting. That's a huge challenge since the role of third-party events is to meet new people that you can't target yourself. I believe in third-party events and their role in a well-balanced portfolio, complementing proprietary, hosted and co-hosted events. The handful of third-party events we still participate in have to have a strong business case including a post-event plan and measurable results. Out of our 2,800 events, less than 10 percent are third-party and how we participate is evolving. Very few are traditional booths. We might sponsor a speaker or breakout session or networking engagement or roundtable. We have even started to partner with industry associations to create co-hosted events.

**LBW:** We're not doing so many of the big [trade] shows anymore. If we're there, we're doing them in a different way. Instead of having a big show floor presence with a theatre and meeting rooms and a big splashy booth; now maybe we have some really intimate meeting space at that show, where we're inviting customers in for one-on-one, very personalized experiences. I asked the managers of our trade shows if the trend is that we're going to be doing less trade shows and they said, no, we are doing more because we're choosing smaller and more direct shows. And we are changing the way we invest and what kinds of shows we invest in, and things that maybe are not traditionally a trade show but a third-party event of some sort that gives us a more direct and relevant group of people to be in front of in a different way. And we talked about how we are creating different kinds of experiences in those environments now that's different than before. We have a significant number of events, especially tier 1 and tier 2 events. But, we're focusing on more relevant events that actually cost less money to be a part of.

**BN:** From the agency/partner side, it's vividly clear to us that there's a trend towards less individual third-party trade shows and more of an effort on the proprietary conferences. That is clear and has been happening for the last five years and is evident across all markets—more emphasis placed on the proprietary event. And it makes a lot of sense. You can measure it better, you're not competing for attention. You have control...

**BC:** ...but it can be challenging—just because you build it doesn't mean they're going to come. Especially if you're trying to get new people there. So, it's a totally different mindset for our teams.

**AH:** We're starting to lean on our partnerships a little more with trade shows. Sony PlayStation, for instance, is a big partner for some of our games and we'll do joint efforts at a show instead of having separate booths.

**EM:** *What are some of the industry's biggest challenges right now?*

**BN:** We're noticing that when there are so many [b-to-b events] happening around the same period of time, it becomes a problem. September and October, there are 15 developer conferences and the audiences are very similar. So which one are attendees going to go to? And how do they know it's the best one? To your point, Barb, if you build it, will they always come? We need to engage, and send a message [to attendees] of what it is that we're going to be showing and how we're going to help them move the needle. Those are real issues, and that's the next wave of competition all brands are facing—how one event is going to be attended with the most, and the right, people.

**LB:** I agree. And what we're seeing is that we need to develop value propositions that are more and more compelling, offer more and more in terms of content, but then you have to be careful not to get to a point where it becomes totally overwhelming, to the point that one cannot really appreciate what the value is. To us, the big challenge is to have a super-compelling offering that is very rich, but we also go to an extraordinary length to show the value and help attendees feel like they're getting a very customized experience that is very relevant to them. So, we want to offer a huge menu and also sort of a very competent waiter to help you make the right selection. And that's sort of the path that we are trying to embark on to achieve that. To really compete in a very, very crowded space. You're absolutely right. October and April... even a very basic thing, such as trying to find dates.

**AM:** Yes, let's talk about venues for a minute. Other than convention centers, it's very difficult to find a venue that holds more than 1,000 people. Even in New York. If you have over 800 people, you're screwed—you're at a big hotel where it's difficult to create a boutique experience really representing your brand.

**LB:** I used to spend one percent of my time thinking about these things and now I need to be meeting with the sourcing team all the time because they cannot find the venues that we need.

**BN:** Right. And it's pushing event marketers to become more creative. So, Google I/O moved to the Shoreline Amphitheater. It left Moscone. It was risky, a little out of the box. But refreshing.

**BRIDGET O'BRIEN:** We have trouble finding those venues that then have enough spaces for breakout sessions as well. Or trying to contain people without having them go to a celebration or a party in another area. And we're in the middle of tackling that in London and Sydney. Because we actually prefer the alternative spaces if we can help it.

**EM:** *Are any of you finding any solutions to the venue shortage?*

**BC:** Our U.K. office took an interesting approach. The year before, they had used the Twickenham soccer stadium for an event and it was challenging because they didn't have the infrastructure to support it. This year, they offered a different track for a different target audience every day in the IBM Customer Center for eight days. The IBM Center in London is on the Thames; it's beautiful. So, here I am thinking this is a cool venue, and it's the IBM office. About 100 people attended each day, which brought the audience down to a manageable number with a specific focus—either role or industry without going to an outside venue. Then, as an example of a more traditional single-day event with multiple tracks in the same location—the Paris conference was held at the Louvre.

**LB:** That's actually something that we are experiencing ourselves. Whenever we want to go for that new context, the central city location is a must. Local attendees are not going to commit to a whole day or multiple days. Most likely they will just want to pop out of their office during lunchtime and just come for a session. Convenient to them. So, we're trying to do that more now. Also, often we get marketing partners or business leaders who want size. They want a big event because that's what has p.r. and buzz and clout and all of that. But in reality, I don't believe that size really matters—it's having the right people. And sometimes that means also making some tactical decisions that may become intuitive.

**BC:** You make such a great point. In parts of Latin America, they know that they cannot get the c-level executives to an event very easily because they'll come in the morning and then they'll be pulled by their clients or teams and daily business needs back to the office. You can't capture them very easily. So they do an event in Miami; it's like going to Las Vegas in the U.S. Miami is very popular. And they put them up in the Fontainebleau and they're out of their country and away from the pull of the office.

**BO:** We've been happy at the San Jose Convention Center for the past three years, however, we were starting to run into a capacity issue as we approach 5,000 attendees. Part of the value prop for our event is that we have these uniting moments where we bring all attendees together for a main stage with inspirational speakers. And, because we're trying to bring them all together in one room it limits us. We can't expand beyond what we're doing now without cutting back on other areas. Our business focus has shifted more to global. So we said, you know what? We're not going to grow the show domestically. Let's just hold on that, and instead, focus our growth globally.

**LB:** We moved our developer conference to the convention center in Seattle. We made the decision a couple of years ago. But also we see a lot of that in the IT industry in general. Seattle is growing beyond Microsoft and Amazon. There is a little bit of rebalancing happening between San Francisco and Seattle. So, fortunately, it kind of worked in our favor. And at the same time we moved our internal readiness event from Seattle to Vegas, to merge with the global readiness event. So, we're kind of looking at, in general, where we're taking some of these large shows in the U.S.

**EM:** *Is measurement and data management getting easier or harder?*

**AH:** One of the things I'm starting to focus on more and more is data capture and trying to show ROI. It hasn't been a huge focus so far. People are very interested in it, but it seems like it takes some budget to get the technology in place to collect that data and measure everything that would produce an ROI. That's my focus right now.

**LB:** I agree. It's something that we started to talk about more seriously in the last two or three years. The biggest challenge is that it takes time to actually see the results. And even if you're an IT company, we see those challenges. From technology, putting the technology in place, but also some very basic things such as taxonomy—calling things by the same name.

**AM:** Right. If Barb came to the event, she's the contact you have. But Barb goes back to her office and she's an influencer in some capacity, and she works for Luca, two heads ahead of her, and Luca actually comes and buys your product. They both work for the same company but we don't do firm-based matching. I think

“...We're not doing so many of the big [trade] shows anymore. If we're there, we're doing them in a different way. Instead of having a big show floor presence with a theatre and meeting rooms and a big splashy booth, now we have some really intimate meeting space at that show, where we're inviting customers in for one-on-one, very personalized experiences.”



**Laura Bell Way**  
Senior Manager-Global  
Customer Events  
Autodesk



that's a very common technology problem. We are actively trying to solve for it.

**BC:** You'd think that would be easy. But, for instance, when I write who I work for, I write IBM. No periods. You might write I period, B period, M period. And someone else might write International Business Machines. Our systems don't know the difference... it's not that easy.

**AM:** It's human behavior, too. Getting everybody to do what they need to do so that you have the information to then do what you need to do. That's tricky.

**LB:** Yes, and it's not something that the event team can just do on its own. It's really a cultural shift across the company.

**BO:** Our sales teams are assigned to accounts, and they're tracking back on how those leads panned out in driving incremental units. We also had specific codes associated to that event that are helping us a little bit. But I think for every unit we track, there are probably four that we're not tracking. These are competitive markets for us. So, there are other measures that we're thinking about as we go into these markets, perceptions of us versus the competition and social and p.r. impressions as well.

To track our events, we are part of the marketing mix modeling that we use to assess all of our marketing channels. It's great we've put events into that modeling process. So there are actually measures that track attribution back to trade shows versus our big QuickBooks Connect events, versus advertising, search and so on. That one is much more expensive and involved. But we've been able to use it to make sure that we're being evaluated along with those other channels. And that's making the conversation a lot more interesting. We also have an influencer and analyst component at our really big shows. They can publish positive reviews and drive interest in our stock. Those kinds of programs are really helping us think beyond the "one for one," and think about other ways that we support the business.

**LB:** Having been on this journey to instrument ourselves and have processes in place for a very few years, now I'm already seeing the next three big challenges. First is that you end up having too much data and it becomes really a big challenge to actually make sense of it. Also because, frankly, when you have too much data you can spin it in in so many different ways. So then the issue becomes how do you really make sense of this data? What really matters? What should be second tier? And then the third thing, which is the next frontier, is what are the insights that you can extract from that data? That's the most important part.

**BC:** It's my favorite word: "actionable." What are you doing with this?

**LB:** Right, what do you do with that? We haven't got there yet. Right now, we may be able to measure ROI, show some interesting dashboards and metrics, but 90 percent of that stuff ends there and a vast opportunity remains untapped, in terms of really using these insights to drive major decisions.

**BN:** Some of it is affirmation, too. Some of it says we're doing something right. If you can evaluate from that perspective, we're

not doing something wrong, we're doing something right. So let's keep doing some of the things that we're doing.

**AM:** We are gaining a great deal of traction now being able to tell year-over-year stories with some level of consistency. Events have a rich history at Bloomberg. Our leaders have believed in them for decades, but the "why" is changing. We have a big focus on using events for the right thing. The right event type by objective, by purpose. Who are we talking to, what are we trying to do, what's the objective? And questioning the default to events... Should it have even been an event? Should it have been a digital campaign? Should it have been a social campaign? We lean on the data. Nothing really complicated, but simple factual influencing... "You said this was thought leadership, and then you're disappointed because you didn't get leads. You don't measure thought leadership with leads. Let's talk about thought leadership measurement." And then how do you get to net new contacts to create and nurture leads without the right ratio of third-party events. Co-hosted events are our best way to get to net new contacts and have played a larger role in our event portfolio.

**EM:** *Talk about how you're connecting before and after your trade shows and events—is social media helping?*

**LB:** Rather than trying to keep people engaged before and after the event, we make our events part of an ongoing community conversation. So, the event for developers, we are now trying to make that particular event last longer or start early. We'd rather make that event very visible and very promoted within that community that already exists, or that we develop. And we kind of position the events as—I want to say a party, but just a fun moment where the community comes together as opposed to trying to extend the event. And we changed this only recently and it's starting to work to give us a good result.

**BO:** We did something very similar last year, as a strategy to bring people in at the top of the funnel. QuickBooks has a community for small businesses and self-employed to learn from each other about being successful. We don't heavily brand it as it's more of a light-handed top of the funnel play. However we do promote our events in it.

This last year we started event groups in the community—we started a speaker group, and we also started a more general attendee group. We launched them a couple months ahead of the event and they generated excitement and drove conversation. We had a pre-, during- and post-engagement strategy. In this community is where we would start that engagement. At the event we had our mobile app and then we also had a live stream of what's happening now. And then we transition everyone back to our community post event, where we had speakers do mini sessions in the community. We also do some light emails to attendees. This approach helped to elongate the engagement.

**LBW:** When I think of building that community and making sure it's available—it's all about extending the message and marketing the event. I think utilizing mobile apps and making them launch at the same time registration is launched is a nice thing to try to get people to not only bring colleagues but get them engaged with the event much earlier. I find it so disappointing when you attend something that they launched the mobile app basically within the

week of the event, because it's such a lost opportunity to really learn more and engage. There's so much you can do with those two or three months before. And then afterwards you can push out your recorded content, you can keep people engaged and get them into the community. Mobile is a great way.

**BC:** Because we're trying to get "new," we don't always have email addresses. So we have to use social media, among other things. That's becoming much more important for us on the audience gen side. Other than that, it's a challenge to maintain that connection.

**EM:** *Many trade shows and events are becoming content platforms that fuel the rest of the mix. How are you managing the content piece?*

**AM:** We actually do distribute—we have a content marketing team that has high demand across the company. Sometimes, content starts at an event and then makes it way to other channels and other times events are used to deliver original content. Content is king. It influences the relevancy of the whole event. Content, messaging and creative delivered through an exceptional experience creates trust and an expectation with the audience. One that they value.

The content teams have different objectives. They're rewarded individually but they all work for the same company. So, the challenge is how you position it and help them understand that you're not there to compete with their job, but there to complement.

**LB:** We're very fortunate that, given the huge amount of content that's generated at these events, it's become clear early on that the events could be the engines to deliver video content for the nurture programs. So now we are perfectly integrated with the nurtured programs—all those automated emails that go out to the database or to new content or never-subscribed, to a newsletter, who comes to a third party event, etc. They always have as one of the calls to action—watch this video, go to these events. So we're perfectly integrated in that. We have a lead-scoring methodology, so if you subscribe to an event it's 10 points, if you come to an event it's 50 points, if you go past a certain threshold, Marketo hands you off to Telesales and you get a call. And that's going through the pipeline.

This has been extremely painful because we are so committed to marketing automation, in a way marketing automation has become the first new function that has made the company and all

the marketing organization see how precious the event content is—because basically they get content for free. It's at an event, and then you have content that can go in those automated emails, and they get it for free. The value that events deliver in terms of content that is usable, viewable—we know that video works so much better than anything else and it's become very clear. And, again, I think marketing automation with its hunger for content is really the reason why we managed to make this work.

**EM:** *What are some of the top challenges you're working through these days? What keeps you up at night that wasn't on your radar five years ago?*

**LBW:** I think one of the key areas of shift is the peer-to-peer learning opportunities, and designing experiences that allow for that, and giving time to allow for that. And the crowdsourced topics and setting up space for one-on-one meetings or topic tables. Or giving them a problem to solve together.

**BN:** What keeps me up is always making sure my team is coming up with creative that makes an experience memorable, that makes it engaging, that makes it two-way. Those are big challenges. And we're looking at events with different perspectives. We're focusing more on how to make and deliver something that's compelling, that's going to give us measurable data and something that will deliver against both the brand and the business.

**LB:** Another thing that I'm seeing is a lot of tension between the more expert people who have been around for a while, who have a certain type of experience and background and baggage, and the younger generation who comes with a different perspective, fresh ideas. There's a lot of friction between the two groups. I'm seeing that every day.

**LBW:** I think even how we work with our teams is changing so much. When you've been managing event teams for over 20 years and now all of a sudden, we're not going to use email, we'll use cloud-based collaboration tools—all these different ways to work on these projects. Email is something that has been our torture for so long, so I love the fact that we're moving away from it to work with our teams and our new team members, and how we're managing projects is totally different. But we have to reinvent and relearn how to work with our talent.

“Rather than trying to keep people engaged before and after the event, we make our events part of an ongoing community conversation. We'd rather make that event very visible and very promoted within that community that already exists, or that we develop. And we kind of position the events as—I want to say a party, but just a fun moment where the community comes together.”



**Luca Balbo**  
Director-Global Events  
Microsoft