Why Conference Book Exhibits Persist

In an online marketplace, don’t overlook the retro approach

By Greg Britton | SEPTEMBER 14, 2015

Absent from the debates over the relative merits of academic conferences — either as disciplinary revival meetings, intellectual proving grounds, or ancient tribal gatherings — has been any discussion of book exhibits.

We usually assume those ubiquitous spaces are part of the cost of registration, and we only notice them when they’re not there. Apart from the plenary and concurrent sessions, the workshops and roundtables, book exhibits are a middle ground between scholarship and commerce. They are where the rubber of ideas hits the road of the marketplace.

Indeed, as a way of selling books, trade fairs may predate academic conferences themselves. The annual book fair in Frankfurt, Germany, has convened mostly without interruption since the late 15th century. Nowadays, with immediate online access to the world’s largest bookstores and digital libraries, it seems odd that book exhibits persist. We can even imagine a time when they, like many independent bookstores, will disappear, perceived as too expensive and too unnecessary.
For publishers, mounting a conference book exhibit is an expensive undertaking, and book sales rarely cover the costs involved. But book exhibits persist because they are more than just places to buy a book. For publishers as well as for scholars they provide one more way to connect with a profession. Like the sessions, meetings, and receptions, book exhibits are another medium of scholarly communications. Here’s how.

Book exhibits are the single best way to see the current state of affairs in any academic discipline, all in one place at one time. Because publishers are eager to show their new wares and present them alongside their bestselling backlist books, an hour or two spent "working" the exhibit — simply shelf-reading titles and author names — can pay off remarkably. Because many publishers announce forthcoming books and journals, or even time the release of new works at these meetings, a scholar can quickly get the sense of where the edge of discourse is in a field.

For the observant scholar, a book exhibit can also be a place to gather intelligence about which books are having an impact, which are attracting attention, and which are going into paperback or a new edition. You have read the review, but here you can handle the book itself, scan the table of contents, and search the index. You can even pull up a chair and read a few pages, just like you used to be able to do in a bookstore.

The best scholars cultivate relationships with editors because they are collaborators in scholarly communications. Exhibits are a terrific place to pitch a book idea, inquire about a press’s general interest in a subject, and ask specific advice about your work. In most conference exhibits, you can often meet the top editors in your field in an hour and find out which of them might be interested in your work.

Fourth, book exhibits are the true commons at an academic conference. While the hotel lobby may be the place senior scholars hold court and sotto voce conversations take place, the exhibit hall is a public marketplace where academics of all rank meet, mingle, and connect. It is the single easiest place to strike up a conversation with another attendee. Information is the lingua franca, and it flows freely in the exhibit aisles.

Just as you might meet a stranger in the book hall, exhibits are a meeting ground for friends and colleagues from across academe. As someone who spends a lot of time in an exhibit booth, I marvel at the serendipitous reunions I see among mentors and students, graduate-school friends, and old colleagues. The exhibit hall may be the original social network, and like all social networks the payoff comes only if you participate.

As the work of scholars has changed, conference exhibits have also become the place where vendors of technology demo their latest offerings. In that way, the medieval concept of the book fair has morphed into something that allows scholars, researchers, and instructors to see many of the digital tools they need.

From the publisher's perspective, the exhibit is an optimal place to meet authors. Editors are hunter-gatherers and are always on the lookout for productive scholars. We are also scouting for peer reviewers, whose opinions we seek to second-guess our own. We are gathering intelligence, too — academic gossip of sorts: Who is working on what? Who is publishing with whom? Who is reading which books?

And, of course, publishers are looking to sell you a book. As long as scholarly publishing is part of a commercial world, book sales will help drive what we select and how we publish it. It is not the only factor in that decision of course, but it is a significant part. When sales dry up, so, too, will the book exhibits and the publishers who pay for them. So at your next academic conference, come by the book exhibit. See what's new. Maybe buy a book. And then tell me what you're reading.

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