AEO & AEV CEO Summit: What organisers and venues really sell each other

Ask most people what organisers buy from venues and they'll probably say space. That was only the starting point for the discussions at this year's AEO & AEV CEO Summit.

Very few formats bring venue and organiser leaders around the same table, so when the summit did, the day was built on a simple discipline: pause deliberately, question how things have always been done, and use the time to move faster together afterwards. Leaders split across four tables, each working a different question about the relationship between the two sides - and every table arrived, independently, at the same answer: a shared value model. Understanding why starts with looking harder at what actually changes hands between an organiser and a venue.

The square metre was never the product

The industry's core transaction has barely changed in decades: space, sold by the square metre, negotiated deal by deal. Everyone in the room - venues very much included - agreed the model undersells what an exhibition actually creates. What an organiser really buys is access to an audience: footfall, dwell time and spend. And what a venue really sells is its share in making that audience bigger, happier and more valuable.

The alternative every table sketched looks the same. A base fee covers the venue's fixed costs, and a variable component is tied to the outcomes both sides create together - visitor numbers, dwell time, spend per head. Retail already works this way with turnover rents, and travel does it with yield pricing. Exhibitions can too.

One condition, though: any evolution of the model has to work for launches and smaller organisers, whose events have no track record yet to price against. A shared value model needs an answer for year one - graduated rates, flexible space and the venue lending its local network - with a fair share of the upside for the venue once the bet pays off.

Untangling the data question

"Who owns the data?" has stalled this conversation for years. The way through is to split the question in two. Aggregate operational data - footfall, dwell time, spend patterns - reveals no competitive advantage, and both sides benefit when it flows freely. Identity-level data - named exhibitors, attendees, buyer intent - is where an organiser's real value sits, and it stays proprietary. Split it this way and the deadlock disappears.

Why does aggregate data matter? Because it unlocks decisions neither side can make alone. Reduce the parking charge and watch spend per head on bacon butties rise - a trade that only becomes visible when both sides can see the same numbers.

There's also a quick win hiding in plain sight: visitors currently re-register from scratch at every show. A single registration, with the venue acting as data processor, would make life better for every visitor and exhibitor in one move.

Making trust routine

Collaboration between organisers and venues is at its best in a crisis, when hierarchies flatten and both sides act as one team. The harder task is bringing that same energy to the day-to-day relationship, and to events going through a slower patch, where a shared effort can have the greatest impact.

Today, too much runs on "rinse and repeat": the show rolls forward each year without a proper debrief, and sales targets on one side and cost targets on the other can pull teams in opposite directions.

The fixes proposed were practical ones: proper post-event wash-ups with a set agenda, senior-level strategy reviews held ahead of need rather than after problems, shared metrics that sit in both sides' bonus structures, and - at the brave end - open-book conversations up to and including P&L.

The discussion also produced two practical ideas. First, a post-event meeting where the venue rates the organiser and the organiser rates the venue against their other partnerships. It would give both sides a clearer picture of what's working and what could be better. Second, a challenge for organisers: every employee should exhibit at a show at least once. Nothing builds empathy for the exhibitor experience faster.

The two elephants: AI and the customer

The most urgent shared challenge named on the day was AI. Both sides are investing in it separately, on the same events, without talking to each other. The opportunity runs both ways: operationally, using AI on shared post-show data to find quick wins for visitors; and strategically, using it to make the industry's economic case to government with one collective voice.

A recurring theme was that organiser and venue are both a cost to the same customer, who currently receives disconnected communications from multiple parties. The goal is a connected customer journey, with a joined-up experience that starts long before arrival and continues beyond the venue through hotels, hospitality and transport.

What was committed to

Summits are easy; commitments are harder. Three were made on the day:

1. **Try new things - with trust and bravery.** Test-and-learn becomes the default posture between organiser and venue, with explicit permission for teams to fail.
2. **Evolve beyond the square metre.** Reframe the commercial conversation around audiences and outcomes, with aggregate data shared as a matter of routine.
3. **Trial the shared value model with a live venue.** A pilot was volunteered on the day, alongside a subvention trial already underway.

The roundtable discussions concluded with each group committing to one action to take forward within 30 days. One idea everyone can adopt is to hold a senior-level debrief within 30 days of an event, built around three questions: what should we deliberately repeat, what would we change with 10% more time or budget, and what did the other side notice that we didn't?

That spirit of openness ran through the whole summit. Every presentation and discussion pointed to the same conclusion: stronger partnerships grow from regular conversations, shared learning and a willingness to keep improving.

The group agreed there was value in meeting again before the next CEO Summit. Rather than waiting another year, members were keen to get back together in the coming months. AEO and AEV will now consider the options and share proposals with members.

So, what do organisers and venues really sell each other? Growth. Audiences, experiences and outcomes that neither side can create alone. The square metre was only ever the wrapper - and it took a rare day of pausing together to see it.

With thanks to everyone who took part - and watch this space as the pilots progress.