



## SISO/UFi Deeper Dive: Case Study on MWC Barcelona

GSMA restarts the European exhibition industry with the production of Mobile World Congress (MWC) Barcelona



## Contents

Overview.....	03
Pivot to digital .....	04
Highlights of 2021 .....	05
Health & Safety.....	06
Exhibitor experience: In their own words .....	07
Attendance Matters.....	08
What's Next .....	10

MWC Barcelona 2021, held June 29-July 1, was one of the first major global events to stage in Europe. The 2021 event drew just under 21,000 in-person attendees and thousands more online worldwide.



“It really  
rebuild  
more o

Mats Granryd  
GSMA

## Overview

On Feb. 12, 2020, [GSMA announced the cancellation of Mobile World Congress \(MWC\) Barcelona](#) — just 12 days before the mega-show was set to open on Feb. 24. Keep in mind: GSMA made this tough call a full month before the U.S. was shut down due to Covid.

“Our biggest asset became our biggest liability when we cancelled,” said John Hoffman, CEO of GSMA, an association that represents 750 operators and 400 companies in the mobile industry. “We had a responsibility to the 110,000 attendees from 200 countries.”

MWC Barcelona was one of the first major global events to cancel, and the news grabbed headlines across media outlets around the world. At the time, no one knew it was the beginning of a global shutdown — with the trade show sector taking one of the hardest hits.

Fast forward to June 2021: MWC Barcelona was one of the first major global events to stage in Europe. “It’s safe and possible to get back together to do business,” said Hoffman. “One thousand companies wanted to exhibit in person, and we are here for those who are ready to get back to business. There’s anticipation and trepidation. It’s not easy to travel, but it’s getting easier every day.”

In June, Spain was emerging from tight restrictions due to Covid. When the show opened on June 28, Spain had an indoor mask mandate in place, and the vaccination rate was pacing at 50%, lagging behind some countries. A few days

before the show, the outdoor mask mandate, which had been in place since summer 2020 for anyone over the age of 6, was lifted in Spain. International travel was limited for this global show due to restrictions, quarantines and corporate travel bans.

“The world is at different places dealing with the pandemic, and so the responses are slightly different,” Hoffman said. “We went to China in February in Shanghai. We held a very large-scale event — maybe not as large as in the past — but very large scale for today’s world — and safe. We used those learnings, and we brought them here. What we want to do now is export those learnings to the rest of the convening ecosystem and help reopen a critical component of business.”

Fira de Barcelona began ramping up about three months before the show, and the venue hosted a scaled-down version of Integrated Systems Europe in early June with about 2,000 attendees.

### Show Dates and Location

#### World Congress Barcelona

**Show Dates:** June 28-July 1, 2021  
(postponed from February)

**Venue:** Fira de Barcelona

**Exhibitors:** 1,000 companies  
(compared with 2,500 in 2019)

**Attendance:** 20,500 in person, plus thousands more online (compared with 110,000 in-person in 2019)

“We are one of the leading destinations restarting the event business,” said Christoph Tessmar, Director, Barcelona Tourism Convention Bureau.

“It’s been tough mainly because of the resources we had. Many of our people were furloughed for the last 15 months,” said Rubén Dalmau, Expansion Sales Director, Fira de Barcelona, which was also home to the largest vaccination site in Catalonia. The facility began ramping back up to its full staff of 380. The venue provided operations, registration, stand-building and other services to GSMA.

“In 2019, MWC Barcelona generated nearly half a billion euros in direct economic impact,” said Tessmar. The city and GSMA have a private/public partnership worth 4 billion euros, and the group generated revenues of 500,000 euros in 2019. “Without a doubt, MWC is the largest trade

event every year.”

MWC Barcelona 2021 drew just under 21,000 in-person attendees and thousands more online worldwide. Since international travel was limited, GSMA offered discounts for local and regional attendees.

In this case study, SISO and UFI take a deeper dive into how GSMA restarted the European exhibition industry with the production of MWC Barcelona in June.

## Pivot to digital

“We have very much embraced the virtual component — not only this year, but historically,” Hoffman said. “In years past pre-Covid, we only streamed our keynotes sessions. When Covid hit, we disbanded all of our in-person events like the rest of the events industry around the world did, but we jumped in very quickly with MWC Thrive or Thrive component, which was virtual.”

Between June and December 2020, GSMA produced six or seven major events online, including its suite of regional events, in Africa, Latin America, Asia Pacific and Eurasia, Hoffman said. “We also produced MWCLA 2020 online, and they were all big productions.”

GSMA’s CMO Stephanie Lynch-Habib added: “We brought through about 40,000 unique viewers and had millions of views on the content.” GSMA developed its event tech platform in-house and promoted digital events via social channels. “We probably have half a million followers across all

This year’s show featured a keynote from Elon Musk who participated virtually with an interviewer from Mobile World Live on site.



accounts on all channels. Our biggest following is on Twitter.” In fact, [@GMSA](#) has 106,000+ followers.

The good news: “50% of virtual attendees were new,” said Hoffman. “We were reaching new eyeballs, new personalities and new sectors and participants that have never had the opportunity to be with us before and that’s really thrilling.”

At the same time, GSMA was eager to get back to business, back to Barcelona and back together, Hoffman said. “We also recognize the virtual world has its limitations. It’s still a work in progress, but that experience gave us the confidence to offer a hybrid experience for MWC Barcelona.”

## Highlights of 2021

For years, MWC Barcelona has attracted CEOs, entrepreneurs and leaders from around the globe who come to speak, meet and greet and learn about new technologies — and 2021 was no different. This year’s show featured a [keynote from Elon Musk](#) who participated virtually with an interviewer [from Mobile World Live](#) on site.

“There are a phenomenal number of CEOs and executives at the event,” Hoffman said. “We’ve always been very senior, and that’s been one of the attributes and strengths of MWC. It is the leadership of the world coming together to discuss debate and inform our future.”

Despite the pandemic, the GSMA Ministerial Program drew 133 delegations from 106 countries and 27 international organizations. More than 650



senior policymakers, regulators, industry leaders and government officials came together to discuss and learn how digital connectivity is serving people while driving economies of the future.

“We had nearly 800 speakers — 70% were in person with 30% virtually,” Hoffman said. “We are a broad ecosystem and right now the pandemic has had an impact ... not everyone who wants to participate has been able to participate. Travel is still complicated and will continue to be complicated. So, we’re bringing the best of both worlds in-person as well as virtual.”

New this year in the main exhibit hall because there was space for the first time, the Four Years From Now (4YFN) Investor Program offered 400 international startups an opportunity to attract the attention of funds, VCs and CVCs.

Entertainment and hospitality in the evening hours is always an important component of MWC. “The MWC event is not one that is a 9-to-5 or 9-to-6 kind of an event,” Hoffman said. “It is four times 24. The ability to get together and network in a slightly different manner and environment is important even during a pandemic. TelcoDr had the main headliners each night, and they had some great opportunities for people to kick back and relax.” TelcoDR’s booth featured an in-person live performance by Jon Bon Jovi.

## Health & Safety

“We didn’t rely on the fact that vaccines are rolling out,” said Hoffman. “Many parts of the world still

MWC participants were required to provide a negative Covid test before entering the venue. The show worked with the venue to provide on-site testing.



don’t have access to the vaccine, so we couldn’t make that a condition. It was too early in the process.”

Instead, all participants were required to provide a negative Covid test before entering the venue. The show worked with the venue to provide on-site testing. There were 80 stations, and the cost of the test was 15 euros on site. Test results were automatically loaded onto a digital badge on the show app.

“When we put this together, it had never been, as far as we know, attempted on a scale quite as large as this,” Hoffman said. (MAGIC, WWIN and OFFPRICE shows in February in Orlando provided on-site testing, but the numbers were much smaller. To find out more, see the [SISO/UFI case study](#)). The venue worked with the health department to approve the show’s plans, said Dalmau.

“Early in the pandemic testing was a bit variable,” Hoffman said. “It’s fairly automated now. What we had to do was figure out how to replicate something that has quality, control and confidence. We interacted closely and developed our processes in conjunction with our health partner as well as the health authorities who guided us. I haven’t heard one complaint about the process.”

On day one at 9 a.m., there were hundreds of people queuing outside of the convention center. It was a massive operation. “The process is as automated as possible,” Hoffman said. “We’re able to move people through the line and get them their test results electronically in less than

20 minutes.”

Exhibitors and attendees needed to have a negative test every 72 hours, and the show was four days, not including setup and teardown. Most people had to get tested twice, but visitors could also upload test results onto the show app from an outside testing facility.

“We chose to absorb part of the testing cost as a cost of doing business,” Hoffman said. “We wanted to encourage people to have an active participation financially in the testing process because it gives them a bit of ownership. It raises the awareness and the importance of testing.”

Given the indoor mask mandate in Spain, FFP2 masks (similar to N95 masks in the U.S.) were required. No cloth masks or other types of disposable masks were allowed, as security outside the venue checked each person going in. The venue sold FFP2 masks, and there were vending machines that sold the masks for 4 euros.

How did GSMA market the event during the pandemic? “We took a very bespoke approach,” said Lynch-Habib. “We have many large customers, and some of them chose not to be here physically for health and safety reasons, which we respect. Once we announced our health and safety plan, it was all about our email channel and individual customer reach-out, which is strong because our ecosystem is strong.”

In the last few weeks leading up to the event, GSMA adopted a texting approach to communicate with registered attendees. “That worked well,” Lynch-Habib said.

## Exhibitor experience: In their own words

SISO interviewed exhibiting companies on site to find out what their experience was like. Here are the key themes:

**Business to be won.** “The business is still here despite the pandemic. There’s business to be won in my opinion.” said Lindor Mehmetaj, International Sales Manager for the [Bring Group](#), an SMS segregator that connects globally with various operators. The company, which exhibited in 2019, has about 150 employees split between two offices in London and Moscow.

**Face-to-face is best.** “We market obviously digitally,” Mehmetaj said. “That’s a fundamental way to market these days, but the best way to do business is always going to be a traditional way of meeting people face-to-face, and that’s what exhibitions offer. We’re all human, we’re not robots.”

**Where business is won.** “Exhibitions like these where you can meet senior leadership within companies and organizations and get that personal touch enables us to have good business partnerships,” Mehmetaj said. “Exhibitions are fundamentally where we win business and that’s why we attend them.”

**Growth despite uncertainties.** Many companies grew during Covid and were looking to expand their businesses. “2020 was a very good year. We could work remotely and a lot of our product and services can be supplied on a remote basis so no problem at all,” said Massimo Olivieri with

OTC Engineering, a 10-year-old company with 30 employees. “I was able to double the revenues.”

**Realistic expectations.** Olivieri’s expectations for the show? “They are not so high at the moment because there are a lot of uncertainties,” said Olivieri, whose company was exhibiting for the first time as part of the Catalonia Pavilion. “Our customers are big companies, and some of them are not here.”

**Media exposure.** In 2018, Blabloo exhibited for the first time. “We first came with the concept of what we do,” said Brian James Douglas with Blabloo, a company that sells a smartphone for kids. “I was interviewed by the BBC for two minutes, and the program was shown throughout MWC every hour on the hour. That was great because we had massive exposure. We were covered in about a thousand publications.” Three years later: The company is now a Google, Microsoft, Samsung and Intel partner. More than 600,000 children in the Spanish speaking world use the product, Douglas said.

**Decision makers in attendance.** “I’ve been coming to MWC for about 20 years, so it’s in my blood,” said Douglas. “This year is a little bit different in terms of the quantity of people, but what I have found is the quality of the people is very high. If you want to talk to the decision maker, the CEOs are here. People come up to your stand, and they want to talk business. So we’re less busy, but when we are busy, it’s intense. It’s clear leads are available at the show, and we will be following up. We live, sleep and eat technology and mobile, so we absolutely had to be here.”

**Re-establish relationships.** “The last 16 months have been very difficult,” said Douglas. “There’s nowhere to buy the phones, so it’s made for a massive breakdown in terms of going to market. By coming here again, we can re-establish those links and meet new people.”

**Hands-on demos have better impact.** “I’ve been talking to some of the ministries of education from around the world and some operators. Seeing them on a screen, that’s fine,” said Douglas “We can show them the phone on the screen, but when they can actually see and demo it in the flesh ... that’s where the impact is. We have seen some big mobile operators here. We’re very pleased with the response and hope it all translates into good business.”

**Global stage.** “It’s been difficult for us to be able to access companies and sell on a global basis,” said Douglas. “By coming here, we have something like 141 nationalities who are here. This is the stage for four days.”

**Want to exhibit in more shows.** “If we start to find there are lots of other opportunities in other geographies, we will go to other shows as well,” said Douglas. “We want to get out there. We want to be seen, and we want to be able to tell our story, which I think is important.”

## Attendance matters

SISO interviewed attendees on site to find out what their experience was like in 2021. Here are the key themes:



**Expanding into new markets.** “In the last year, we have moved into new markets like the medical device and the mobility sectors,” said Sergi Domeyo Fauro with Nexium, which produces automotive components based in Barcelona. “We are coming from the automotive sector, and we are moving to these new markets. It’s nice to see that we are back to business and starting to network again. It is something that I’ve been missing for the last year.”

**Looking for partners.** Fauro’s company attended to “see if we can start to get to know new companies with potential partnerships for these new products that we are developing,” he said. “That is my expectation. We have come across with a couple of companies, which are quite interesting for us. We got the contacts, and we’ll keep working on meetings with them and see if something comes up. Every year, we’ll make at least one customer. We always do, so it’s worth it to come.”

**Network with potential buyers.** “One goal is to present my company to other bigger companies and develop those sorts of relationships,” said Mathias Suarez, Impass Studios, a two-year-old startup based in Vienna, Austria. “A couple of companies are very interested in our project.”

**Launch new-to-market company.** Saurez’s other goal: Find the best way to announce my company and launch it. As a first-time attendee, he said: “I’m coming here in representation of my colleagues to seek new ideas and new ways to improve our project and make people notice it.”

**Different ideas, suggestions and approaches.**



Postponed from February, MWC Barcelona 2021 was held June 28-July 1 at Fira de Barcelona. There was an indoor mask mandate in place.

“The point is you are right here at MWC, and you can find different approaches, different ideas, different suggestions, which is helpful as a start up,” Douglas said.

**Content is king.** “I am interested in education and keynotes, like Elon Musk and other executives, and the opportunity to meet people and learn about new tech,” said Oriol Carreras Marti, a freelance web developer.

**Thought leadership opportunities.** “I paid my own way due to Covid-related travel restrictions put in place by my employer,” said Allen Smith, VP Digital & Service Design at Electrolux, who was a speaker at MWC. “Given this was not business critical, I could not justify expensing the trip, although I know in any other time it would not have been an issue. Like a lot of people, I was eager to get back to something ‘normal’ and interact with people again. Also, because MWC was so scaled back, the hotel and airfare were



In 2021, 1,000 companies wanted to get back to business and exhibit in person at MWC Barcelona.

quite reasonable, and it was a vacation week for me.”

**Operations ran smoothly.** “This was clearly not a typical MWC, but MWC organizers made the best of a bad situation,” Smith said. “In the end, it was probably good they went ahead. The mobile passes worked well this year and, all in all, the logistics were quite good. I hope these carry forward in the coming years.”

**Missed the social events.** “As a speaker, MWC really did a wonderful job preparing and ensuring I had all the information needed,” Smith said. “It was professional and well done. The downside was there were no social events. The parties and events are really the highlight and where you get to meet the most interesting people, but with Covid that was clearly something that was not

possible this year. Hopefully we can make up for it next year.”

## What’s Next

MWC Los Angeles is scheduled to take place Oct 26-28 at Los Angeles Convention Center. Participants will be required to provide proof of either vaccination or a negative Covid test to access the venue with temperature checks administered at access points. MWC Barcelona 2022 will be held Feb 28-March 3 at Fira de Barcelona.

Barcelona is scheduled to host IBTM in November. “This year we will be still quiet with some events, but the prospects for 2022 are amazing,” said Tessmar. “We have a lot of big events scheduled in the city for the whole year.” For example, Diversified Communications’ Seafood Expo is scheduled to be held in April in Barcelona for the first time in 2022, after moving from its long-time home in Brussels.

“We have to see how the situation will be next year, but we are positive and confident. I think the recovery has just started,” said Tessmar.

In September, Fira de Barcelona hosted Expoquimia, an international chemistry event.

“Covid has very much shown us that the old way of doing things is great, and the new way of doing things is probably some hybrid of the old plus the new and some of the undeveloped yet,” Hoffman said. “So, we’re not done. It’s a work in progress.”



**John Hoffman**  
CEO, GSMA

“There are a phenomenal number of CEOs and executives at the event. We’ve always been very senior, and that’s been one of the attributes and strengths of MWC. It is the leadership of the world coming together to discuss debate and inform our future.”



In 2019, MWC Barcelona generated nearly half a billion euros in direct economic impact. The 2022 event is scheduled for Feb 28-March 3 at Fira de Barcelona.

## KEYNOTE STAGE





**About SISO** – SISO members include companies, corporations and other for-profit entities that own, produce or provide full-service management of “face to face” trade shows, consumer shows, expositions, conferences and events. SISO membership is a combination of large corporations and small entrepreneurial enterprises that do business around the world. SISO’s almost 200-member companies produce thousands of events around the world. SISO’s Mission is to meet the common needs of our members by providing peer networking opportunities, education, industry information, streamlined business processes and best practices in the industry.



**About UFI** – The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry: UFI is the global trade association of the world’s tradeshow organisers and exhibition centre operators, as well as the major national and international exhibition associations, and selected partners of the exhibition industry. UFI’s main goal is to represent, promote and support the business interests of its members and the exhibition industry. UFI directly represents more than 50,000 exhibition industry employees globally, and also works closely with its 60 national and regional association members. More than 800 member organisations in 83 countries around the world are presently signed up as members. Around 1,000 international trade fairs proudly bear the UFI approved label, a quality guarantee for visitors and exhibitors alike. UFI members continue to provide the international business community with a unique marketing media aimed at developing outstanding face-to-face business opportunities. UFI is supporting the work of global, regional, and national institutions that deal with the COVID-19 outbreak. On this page, we are listing some resources for UFI members and the industry at large: <https://www.ufi.org/industry-resources/coronavirus/>.

***If you want to support our collection of case studies, please contact us:  
[info@siso.org](mailto:info@siso.org) and/or [reopen@ufi.org](mailto:reopen@ufi.org)***