



## SISO/UFi Deeper Dive: Case Study on Super Pet Expo

How All Show Services Produced a B2C Show  
Safely and Successfully in Virginia



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**Supporting Small Businesses.** 91 percent of exhibitors at Super Pet Expo are small business owners.

## Overview

After postponing the Super Pet Expo twice this year due to COVID-19 (the first time within eight days of the March event), Eric Udler, Producer, All Show Services, made the decision to move forward with Super Pet Expo, a B2C event, when he was offered one of the few open weekends on the calendar for the rest of 2020 at the Dulles Expo Center in Chantilly, VA.

Originally scheduled for March 20-22, the show was first postponed to June 12-14. Stay-at-home orders in Virginia were not lifted until June 10, so Udler postponed the event again because there was simply no way to market a consumer event so soon after the state's reopening.

During the first week of July (about 45 days out from the event), Udler surveyed 11,000 past attendees via email to gauge sentiment. With a 9 percent response rate, nearly half of respondents – 49 percent – indicated they would attend the show while 21 percent said they would not. “That’s probably indicative of our society overall,” Udler said. “There’s a certain percentage of the population that can’t attend for medical or family reasons or does not feel comfortable gathering.”

But more than half of past attendees indicated they would be likely or more likely to attend with wider aisles, mask mandates and temperature checks. “Once I saw these results, I thought we may have a shot,” Udler said.

Held Aug. 28-30, The Super Pet Expo attracted 129 exhibitors and more than 5,000 attendees.

Despite the exhibit floor being down 43 percent and only attracting one-third of its typical attendance of 15,000 to 17,000 over three days, “the show exceeded my expectations,” Udler said. “I’ve been on the national radar because the show was one of the first. I don’t know that I made up the rules. I used common sense to figure out what would be best and create a safe environment.”

How was he able to pull off one of the first consumer shows in the U.S. since COVID-19? Udler shares insight on how to safely produce an event during a pandemic. To get the full picture, SISO and UFI take a deeper dive by including perspective from convention center management, an attendee and an exhibitor on their show experience.

### Key Highlights

- **Face masks required.** As of May 29, 2020, the Commonwealth of Virginia requires that people wear masks when spending time in indoor public settings.
- **Limited capacity in each hall of 50% or 1,000 people.** The show used two halls with a total capacity of 1,932 for both halls to comply with state guidelines. Full capacity for the building is typically 5,500.
- **No temperature checks for attendees.**
- **Daily temperature checks for exhibitors and staff.**
- **5 feet of “dead” space between booths**
- **Minimum of 14-foot aisles. Some aisles were 17 feet wide.**

While many states, counties and cities still have restrictions on gatherings, the Commonwealth of Virginia allowed the Dulles Expo Center to reopen under the guidelines of an “entertainment venue.” Dulles Expo Center GM Bob Morgan said he worked with VA Gov. Ralph Northam’s office to comply with the state’s guidelines, which limits capacity in the facility to 50% or no more than 1,000 people in each of the center’s two halls. The building’s full capacity is typically 5,500 in two halls that total 130,000 gross square feet. Two large roll-up doors separate the two halls. Super Pet Expo was the third event held at the

privately owned building since the state reopened in June. The Hot Tub & Swim Spa Blowout Expo was held July 10-12 and July 17-19, and the Nation’s Gun Show was held Aug. 21-23 — the weekend prior to Super Pet Expo. The suburban facility is located in the heart of Northern Virginia’s high-tech corridor in Fairfax County, VA. Dulles Expo Center is six miles south of Dulles International Airport and 26 miles from Washington, DC.

“It’s one of the most affluent and densely populated areas in the country,” Udler said.

## Attendance Matters

Even if the show could go on, would attendees come? Surveying previous attendees turned out to be a critical factor in making the go/no-go decision. “I gave myself a 90-day plan to make the go/no-go decision, then a 60-day plan and then a 45-day plan,” Udler said. “We regularly survey attendees and exhibitors, and we were thrilled to get 1,021 responses.”

The survey included seven questions, ranging from would you be more likely to attend an event with wider aisles to how would you feel about managed ticket entry. The key question: “We know the situation is very fluid, with news coming every day. But as of now, what is the likelihood that you will attend Super Pet Expo as scheduled August 28-30?” While 48 percent said they very likely or somewhat likely to attend, 22 percent said they were uncertain. Udler felt like he might be able to move the needle.



**Face Masks Required.** All attendees and exhibitors were required to wear masks at the show in compliance with state mandates.

“I was hesitant before going, but I felt completely comfortable from the moment we walked in,” said Sharon Hall, who has attended the show for a number of years. She usually attends with her husband and one of their five dogs, and this year was no different.

Hall, who works at a hospital, and her husband, who is a police officer, purchased t-shirts, dog treats, collars and other pet supplies from exhibitors. “My husband even bought a rum cake from one of the vendors,” she said. “We sampled a piece of cake that was available in an individual container with a lid.”

## Exhibitors First

In 2019, Super Pet Expo attracted 200 exhibitors. When the show was postponed in March, “I knew right away it was best for me to offer full refunds right away,” Udler said. Refunds, rollover credits and contract terms have created pain points between some exhibitors and organizers since the pandemic. Why did Udler offer full refunds despite contract terms that stated otherwise? “I made a decision that I’ve lived my whole life by ... reasonable people make reasonable decisions,” Udler said.

It appears that decision paid off. In the end, more than half of the exhibitors opted to stick with the event and exhibit in 2020 because as it provided crucial sales for many small businesses that were hit hard by the pandemic. “Ninety one percent of vendors are small business owners, and 73 percent of vendors are local small business owners,” Udler said. Annual sales of

pet products and services in the United States reached \$95.7 billion in 2019 spending, according to research from the American Pet Products Association.

“Our small business needs these shows to keep going,” said Russ Stellmach, owner of R&B Craft, who builds custom wood toys and supplies for dogs from his base in Annville, PA. His company doesn’t sell its products to any major retailers, but instead sells via Etsy, Amazon, consumer shows and craft fairs. For this year’s Super Pet Expo, he added a plexiglass shield to his booth to create a barrier when attendees paid for products.

**Here’s a link to an interview with Stellmach that the show posted before the event:**



**[R&B Crafts owner Russ Stellmach talks 2020 Super Pet Expo](#)**

“I made about one-third of the sales we typically generate at the show,” said Stellmach, who has exhibited at Super Pet Expo for about eight years. “I debated about whether to exhibit or take the refund, but this is my livelihood.”

Stellmach wasn’t able to exhibit in events from March to April, but he was able to generate revenue from online sales. “Expenses are higher though because of shipping,” he said. Stellmach said he felt safe at the show, and the customers who attended were eager to buy. “Traffic was down, but I knew it would be going in,” he said. “In retrospect, I would exhibit again, and the sales generated covered my booth and travel expenses.”

## Marketing Mix

The hardest part: Getting people there, especially during a pandemic. Consumer shows rely on radio, TV, billboard, newspaper and digital advertising to market the show and get the word out in local and regional communities. Spots are usually upbeat featuring an excited announcer who quickly highlights the show’s dates, hours, location and features. “We toned down the messaging and also included details about the mask requirement and referred people to our web site for safety information,” Udler said.

Super Pet Expo also markets via email. “In a typical year, we sell anywhere from 50 to 60 percent of tickets online,” Udler said.

**Here’s a link to a TV spot  
that ran in August:**



**[Super Pet Expo Returns To The Dulles Expo Center](#)**

His company invested its time and resources in online ticketing in part to get attendee email addresses since 66% of attendees are repeat. In 2020, 70 percent were sold online. “We only offered a discount for online sales,” Udler said. “No discounts were offered at the door.”

The price of admission is \$13 for adults, \$8 for children ages 4-12 and free for children 3 and under. The show may have also benefited from coverage by a number of Washington, DC-area TV stations that featured segments with show management and exhibitors at the show.

**Here are links to those segments:**

[SPE Chantilly WJLA August 27, 2020 5 AM](#)

[SPE Chantilly WJLA August 27, 2020 6 AM](#)

[SPE Chantilly WJLA August 27, 2020 7AM](#)

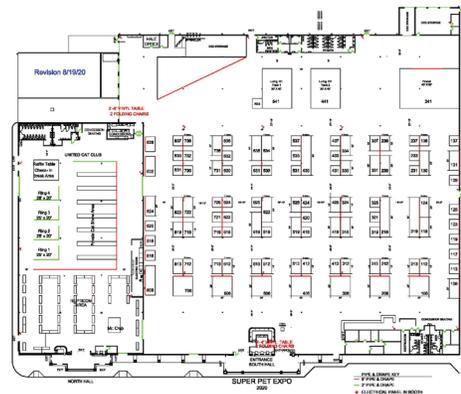
## Event Design Edits

To adhere to Virginia’s guidelines, the floor plan was reworked to add five feet of space between each booth. The show already had wider aisles, so they had no problem complying with the requirement of a minimum of 14-foot aisles.

To maximize capacity limits within the center, the show was divided into two halls. Two roll-up doors are usually open between the halls, but the building suggested they closed the door to increase overall capacity. Under current guidelines, the capacity for one hall was 1,000, and the other hall was 932. The event was able to double its capacity, but it required attendees to leave one hall and then exit to go through the second one.

Physical distancing was considered for the restrooms, where every other urinal, stall and sink were blocked off. “In partnership and cooperation with the local health department, the facility, attendees and vendors, we were able to put on a safe and successful event for everyone involved,” Udler said.

**Here’s a look at the final floor plan:**



**SPE Floor Plan 2020**

## Increased Costs to do Business

The show did not change the pricing for exhibitors or attendees. “The price is the price,” Udler said. “But our costs to produce the show increased.”

The Dulles Expo Center now requires shows to have two armed police officers during the event. “We have added a COVID attendum to our licensing agreement for events in the building,” Morgan said. “The event promoter

is required to comply with the CDC and state guidelines.” The building instituted a daily COVID fee, which includes costs for armed police officers, additional cleaning during set-up, run of show and post-show, supplies like hand sanitizer and a new camera system that was installed to count the number of people going in and out of the building to comply with capacity limits.

“It’s a separate fee that we know is temporary,” Morgan said. Per event day, COVID-19 fee is \$950 for the South Hall, \$750 for the North Hall, or \$1,050 for both halls.

“The biggest challenge is mask compliance,” Morgan said. “After doing all this work to get the building open, we want to stay open. We think officers on site will help.” In fact, one attendee at Super Pet Expo would not comply with the mask mandate after repeated requests from show and building staff. Police eventually escorted the woman out of building when she refused to comply.

“That was the only incident we had,” Udler said. “Over the course of three days, we had three people who weren’t wearing masks when they arrived, and we stopped them before they went in. They had masks but weren’t wearing them. We purchased 200 disposable masks, but I only gave out one.

”With reduced attendance and exhibitors as well as increased costs, the show did not generate a profit. Without pandemic or cancellation insurance, “we lost less

than we would have if the show was canceled completely,” Udler said.



**Producing a Safe Show.** The exhibit hall featured 14- to 17-foot aisles and limited capacity in each hall of 50% or 1,000 people.



*“In partnership and cooperation with the local health department, the facility, attendees and vendors, we were able to put on a safe and successful event for everyone involved”*

*- Eric Udler*



## Show Dates and Hours

Super Pet Expo did not alter show hours because of the pandemic.

- Friday, Aug. 28, 3-8 p.m.
- Saturday, Aug. 29, 10 a.m.-7 p.m.
- Sunday, Aug. 30, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.



**Pets Welcome.** The Super Pet Expo attracted 129 exhibitors and 5,000+ attendees and their pets.



**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.

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