



## SISO/UFI Deeper Dive: Case Study on IGES & SMGS

Show & Sell: An inside look at two gift shows — one by Emerald and one by Clarion — that were held in-person in November in Tennessee



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IGES was the 11th event held at the LeConte Center in Pigeon Forge, TN, since the venue reopened for events in June.



## Overview

If you build a marketplace during COVID-19, will exhibitors and attendees come? The answer was clearly yes for the International Gift Expo of the Smokies (IGES), produced by Emerald, and the Smoky Mountain Gift Show (SMGS), produced by Clarion Events North America — the first B2B events in the U.S. for these independent show organizers since the onset of COVID-19 shut down the exhibition industry in March.

## Why these Shows and Why Now?

“A lot of it has to do with the restrictions in each city or state,” said Brian Field, Interim President & CEO, Emerald, a public company (EEX) that last year produced 150 events and trade shows. “Tennessee has been open for the last several months.”

The [LeConte Center](#), a venue in Pigeon Forge, TN that offers 105,000 square feet (sf) of exhibit space, had plenty of pandemic production experience because it hosted 10 events with an estimated 63,000 attendees since June (IGES was the 11th event for the LeConte Center). Over three days in August, the Great Smoky Mountain Jeep Club Invasion, a consumer event, attracted 27,000+ attendees and more than 12,000 jeeps to the center, said Phil Campbell, General Manager, LeConte Center.

“The Jeep event that took place was really quite remarkable and certainly gave us a lot of comfort that this particular facility could

handle it,” Field said. “We developed our [Preparedness, Prevention and Response Plan](#), based on the *All Secure* framework built by the industry and endorsed by SISO and UFI. We worked with the venue and [Shepard](#), and we were confident that we would provide a safe environment.

“Safety is critical, along with the practical ability for a show to trade based upon local restrictions,” Field said. “When we look at the facts and circumstances around a particular show — and whether or not it can happen — some of the decisions are very black and white if the restrictions won’t permit an event to stage.” As was the case for many Emerald shows in 2020 at venues in New York, Las Vegas, and Denver — to name a few. Major cities like New York, Las Vegas, and Chicago are still under strict gathering restrictions imposed by state and local governments (Jan. 8, 2021).

Gatlinburg, TN, where SMGS was held, had

### Show Dates & Locations

International Gift Expo of the Smokies (IGES),  
produced by Emerald  
Nov. 4-7, 2020  
LeConte Center, Pigeon Forge, TN

Smoky Mountain Gift Show (SMGS), produced  
by Clarion Events North America  
Nov. 4-7, 2020  
Gatlinburg Convention Center, Gatlinburg, TN

plenty of pandemic production experience. The venue has hosted 21 events with 45,000 visitors since it reopened in June and hosted 31 events between June and December 2020. No COVID-19 cases have been reported from the events, said Mark Adams, President and CEO, Gatlinburg Convention & Visitors Bureau.

“We may be the busiest convention center in the country,” Adams said half-jokingly. “Of those 31 events, 11 events were not booked before the pandemic, but 39 shows were postponed or rescheduled to 2021 or 2022. We only had three cancelations. We’ve had every type of conference, trade show and convention. We’ve been able to book events that couldn’t be held in different states with tighter restrictions.” While

some wonder how and why Tennessee can support two gift shows, it’s important to note that the Great Smoky Mountains National Park attracted 12.5 million visitors in 2019, according to [data from the National Park Service](#). Along with that, there are thousands of gift and souvenir retailers throughout the region. “We’re adjacent to the park,” Adams said.


Emerald also factored in the number of attendees and exhibitors within driving distance. “About 75% of the U.S. population east of the Mississippi is within a one-day drive to the area,” said Karalynn Sprouse, Executive Vice President, Emerald.

### It All Came Down to Customer Needs

“Our research, along with by others like UFI and Explori, showed that the real benefit is meeting face to face,” Field said. “It’s the social aspect. It’s being able to see and touch and feel the product they’re going to buy. It’s one thing to see a picture of it, and it’s another thing actually to look the manufacturer in the eye. The buyers want to know the person they’re about to do business with.”

In fact: While the number of exhibiting companies at IGES was down 60%, buyer attendance was only down 30%. The attendee-to-exhibitor ratio increased by 75% from 7.07 attendees per exhibitor to 12.00 attendees per exhibitor.

“It doesn’t hurt that this is still a pretty healthy industry. The fact that 70% of the market still said, ‘I’m in business, and I’m willing to be here



Floor stickers, signage, public address announcements, staff shirts, and more highlighted health and safety protocols.



is, 'that's important,' said Greg Topalian, CEO, Clarion. At SMGS, 70% of exhibiting companies participated compared with last year.

How did Emerald and Clarion produce these events during COVID-19? In this white paper, SISO and UFI take a deeper dive to provide members with vital information on how to proceed during these uncertain times. We interviewed executives at both show management companies, as well as contractors, venues, hotels, attendees, and exhibitors, to find out the full scoop. Here's what we learned.

## Planning & Profits

One question that's top of mind: Is Emerald generating a profit from IGES, and is it worth it to produce an event at the reduced numbers? "Yes. The real trick is in the planning," Field said. "So much of the cost is variable — typically about 70%. Even 30% of costs that are fixed are also somewhat variable. If you've got enough foresight, done enough planning, and know months in advance, the show is likely to be smaller; you can plan around that and further manage those costs."

Emerald renegotiated contracts with hotels, venues, and other service providers. COVID-19 has "provided the opportunity to do that, because, of course, everybody's business is different," Field said. "The ecosystem is so intertwined with organizers, general service contractors, hotels, and the travel industry overall."

When 2020 kicked off, it was a seller's market on the venue and hotel side as many reported 2019

was one the most successful years in history, but it became a buyer's market when the industry ground to a halt in March. Like show organizers, event industry suppliers are hungry for business as they fight to keep their companies open. Many hotels are on the brink of bankruptcy, and millions of jobs are at stake. Venues sit idle, and convention center staff and union labor are furloughed.

"At the beginning of 2020, we had 1,200 events on the books," said Steve Basch, CEO, Shepard. "Through the first quarter of 2020, we produced about 300 events. Since then, we've produced 10. We are talking to a few clients who have canceled their national event about doing much smaller regional events or roadshows in 2021. A few groups are inquiring, but they haven't booked yet."

## Exhibitor Experience

The exhibit floors at both shows were smaller than last year. Before the pandemic through March, IGES was pacing at +3% YOY. IGES is typically held at two venues — one in Pigeon Forge and one in Sevierville, TN. Due to limitations on large gatherings in Sevierville, IGES was consolidated into one location at the LeConte Center.

Some larger exhibiting companies didn't participate due to corporate or travel restrictions, and a handful of Canadian exhibitors didn't participate due to travel quarantines. There were about 47% fewer exhibitors at IGES and about 30% fewer exhibitors at SMGS. However, Emerald reported 70 new or returning (win-back) exhibitors.

To make the exhibit experience as safe as possible, there was no aisle carpet whenever possible to help with disinfection. There were wider one-way and two-way aisles to assist with physical distancing at both shows.

In response, a majority of exhibitors felt safe at the events, with 88% of exhibitors agreeing that IGES's approach to addressing concerns about COVID-19 to be "Very Good" or "Excellent," according to a post-show survey by Emerald.

"Of course, we were a little skittish to exhibit, and we wondered if there were going to be buyers here," said IGES exhibitor Justin Woodruff, General Manager at Sandy Creek Mining Company. "But there are plenty of people here, and everyone seems to be motivated to buy.

"Business is still good, but it has changed," said Woodruff, who typically exhibits in about seven trade shows annually. "On the agri-tourism side, it's been good. For us, it's more about seeing our existing customers and continuing to build those relationships. We've got some of our biggest customers attending this show."

Other exhibitors reported the same hesitations and positive outcomes. "We deliberated whether we should exhibit this year at IGES because of the fear of COVID-19," said IGES exhibitor Rick Conway, Founder and President of Squire Boone Village. "Would buyers come? Would we be safe? Emerald assured me they had worked hard to convince buyers to go and that they would be safe. They said buyers coming needed to buy, and they were right! COVID safety protocols were



**While the number of exhibiting companies at IGES was down 60%, buyer attendance was only down 30%. The attendee-to-exhibitor ratio increased by 75% from 7.07 attendees per exhibitor in 2019 vs. 12.0 attendees per exhibitor in 2020.**

all in place and in such a friendly and organized way. We had buyers come from as far away as Connecticut, Mississippi, Texas, Florida, and South Dakota, and they reported they had a great summer season and were low on merchandise," Conway said. "We wrote more and larger orders than I would have ever imagined. I couldn't be more happy and grateful to Emerald for opening the IGES show and making it possible for us to start recovering from the devastating effects of the pandemic."

Early sentiment scores from IGES post-show surveys reveal a significant increase in exhibitor satisfaction. In contrast, attendee scores are lower, which correlates to the increase in attendee to exhibitor ratio and the decrease in exhibitor to



attendee ratio, according to Emerald. “We’re just glad to be here and support the mom-and-pop retailers because that’s what we are,” said Shirley Szabo, Owner, Andreas Silicone, whose company manufactures and distributes silicone products like jar openers, trivets, and then posters. “My husband made the first one for me about 18 years ago, and we’ve been doing it ever since.”

As in years past, Szabo and her husband drove to the event with product from their headquarters in Tamaqua, PA. “We typically generated about \$10,000 to \$12,000 in sales at IGES, and we increased our booth space in 2020 from 10x10 to 10x20. We felt we had to show up because you have to start somewhere. We have to get back to whatever that new normal is going to be. We’re picking up for Christmas and writing orders at the show.”

## Retailers Need Product

Melissa DeRosa, Office Manager of Covert/South Haven KOA, drove nine hours from Covert, MI, to attend the show for the first time with her husband. “It’s not too packed with people, which was my biggest concern,” said DeRosa, who spent three days at IGES and SMGS. “There’s plenty of space, and we felt safe the entire time.”

She spent the first-morning visiting exhibitors with whom they had bought from before, and she said they would spend the rest of the time looking for new products and suppliers, like socks, magnets, jewelry, candy, and toys. “We had a good year this year, and our store did the best it has done in a long time,” she said. “There are so many

new campers this year, and campgrounds are doing well. We’re excited to fill the store and see how next year goes. We’re excited to be finding more things.”

According to Emerald’s post-show attendee survey, the biggest operational challenge retailers face during the current environment is inventory shortage and sourcing new products. The company reported that 93% of attendees agree that IGES’s approach to addressing concerns about COVID-19 to be “Very Good” or “Excellent.”

Norman Rankin, SVP of merchandising and wholesale for Bargain Hunter, a retail chain with 89 stores in 10 states, said: “This is the first show I’ve attended since the pandemic arrived. My experience has been excellent, and there’s a high degree of focus on safety.”

Based near Nashville, the private company generates revenues “north of \$200 million,” said Rankin, who drove three hours to IGES. “We sell everything from furniture and food to apparel and home goods.”

Rankin attends several trade shows in a typical year, including ASD, the National Hardware Show, and the Inspiring Home Show. “I’ve attended the ASD show for the last 34 years,” he said.

How has the lack of shows impacted his business? “If you’re in the fashion business or the closeout business, it has daily dynamic changes,” he said. “It’s hard to convey the item itself in a digital world. People want to touch it. People want to feel the quality of it.”

Another impact has been staff development.

“We have been building our buyer teams as the company has grown, but those more recent hires are having a harder time assimilating without the benefit of going to a show walking with your boss or colleagues. A show gives you an intense two or three days walking around with them.”

Maximizing time is a key factor for his participation in trade shows. “I’m a big fan of trade shows for the ability to communicate, collaborate, execute, in a concentrated period of time” Rankin said.

“A well-organized trade show is the best use of your time, and that can’t be replicated. But at the same time, there are some advantages to digital when it comes to saving time from traveling, being in your home and your bed at night.”

Digital will be helpful in supplementing the time between trade shows, he said, but he also admitted that he hadn’t participated in any virtual trade shows so far this year. “As much as I believe in the trade shows, I’m curious as to what this forced behavior does to future strategy,” he said. “We can digitize certain things.”


What’s next? His company does not have any travel bans in place, but there have not been many options for in-person trade shows in the retail sector since early November. In a non-COVID year, the trade show calendar is typically lighter in December due to the holidays. “We’re sensitive to what the individual buyer feels comfortable with,” Rankin said. “Some of my folks drove to Atlanta for a gift show. That’s a short drive.”

### Relying on Partners

Besides the venue’s experience with hosting events during a pandemic, show management relied on their other suppliers like Shepard, Fern Expo, Experient, and WESS Event Services to help them produce the show safely.

Shepard, Emerald’s contractor, had produced a handful of events, including an HR show in Florida and Mecum Auto Auctions in Indianapolis, Orlando, and Houston.

“All the shows that we have produced in the last eight months have had a drive-in audience and smaller exhibiting companies that don’t have strict restrictions on travel,” said Kevin Belanger, Vice President of Business Development,



According to a post-show survey by Emerald, 93% of attendees agree that IGES’s approach to addressing concerns about COVID-19 to be “Very good” or “Excellent.”



Shepard. “There are slight differences for exhibitors and our teams, but for the most part, it’s still the same process.”

Part of what’s new includes onsite signage and floor stickers that highlight health and safety protocols. Shepard provided templates for signage with CDC guidelines and graphics.

“We opted not to put show logos on the signage so that we can reuse them,” said Anne McConahey, Director of Operations, Emerald. “For security, we worked WESS Event Services, which has experience with crowd control at sporting events during COVID-19.”

What will the operations team do if there are positive COVID-19 cases after an event? “Follow public health guidelines,” said Jody Mosley, VP, Operations, Emerald. “It sounds simple and obvious, but it’s easy to go down the rabbit hole of what-if scenarios. There’s no need to reinvent the wheel.”

## Collaborating with competitors

One of the pandemic’s silver linings is that Emerald and Clarion collaborated and coordinated for the first time in 2020. Sprouse took the lead and set up weekly meetings between the IGES and SMGS teams leading up to the shows to discuss co-marketing, health and safety measures, track exhibitor and registration trends, and determine consistent policies. “We were working toward the common goal of delivering the most value possible to our customers and at the same time help the



trade show industry get back on its feet by hosting a successful and safe event,” Sprouse said. “The Tennessee Market Week brand was born. IGES and SMGS jointly agreed to market and promote this unified message.”

Tennessee Market Week promoted 600 vendors at both events to buyers via email promotions, show web sites, and social channels, like Facebook and LinkedIn. There was a free shuttle that ran between the two events.

## Testing vs. Quarantine

Quarantines can be a huge issue for exhibitors and attendees. “The other way through for organizers to come up with a standard around testing,” Field said. “Testing is super important,

and it's constantly evolving."

Currently, only one at-home rapid test, Ellume, has been approved by the FDA. "It's the Wild West," Field said. "It's just not quite there yet. At this point, the overall plan is to come up with a set of standard protocols and requirements for evaluating COVID testing providers. Maybe by Q1 2021, the technology will have evolved enough."

In the absence, what do customers want? "They want to make sure people are wearing masks, doing the temperature checks, and there are spacing and safety protocols in place," Field said. "I haven't gotten a single question from a customer asking where's your COVID test. That's just not happening."

## What's Next

Many of the largest shows in the U.S. have postponed their events to the back half of 2021. "It's totally safer," Field said. "but that's only good insofar as that aligns with the customer need. We are extremely diligent in evaluating postponement options. You can't move a Q1 event when all the buying for a customer happens in Q1. It just doesn't work. There are some cases where that's obvious. There are some cases where it's necessary but less obvious. In some cases, it just didn't work."

In a typical year, the Emerald sales team would do a hard push for exhibit sales renewals several weeks before show staging; however, due to the current climate, the team took a less aggressive

rebook approach that started onsite. "We renewed over half of the exhibitors for 2021," Sprouse said. Other lessons learned? "Part of the learning was emotionally overcoming that we don't have to cancel everything," Topalian said.

Clarion produced the Grand Strand Gift Show, Dec. 6-9, in Myrtle Beach, SC. Emerald is producing the Surf Expo, Jan. 6-9, at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, FL.



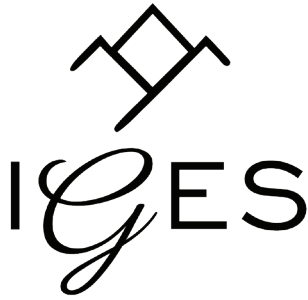


## Need to Know: Highlights of What's New in 2020

- Daily temperature checks at each show before entering. Emerald provided color-coded wristbands, and Clarion used color-coded stickers for badges for security teams to monitor access.
- Face masks were required by show management for all staff and customers. There was also a countywide mask mandate in effect.
- The show organizers provided no receptions or meals to promote mask-wearing at all times during the events. Both events typically host networking functions like receptions, award dinners, and breakfasts. Instead of donuts and coffee during registration, Emerald hired a band to entertain.
- Contactless registration.
- Pre-registration required.
- No aisle carpet at IGES to help with disinfection and wider one-way and two-way aisles to assist with physical distancing at both events.
- New onsite communication. Lots of new signage, floor stickers, public address announcements, staff shirts, and more highlight health and safety protocols.
- There was constant cleaning of surfaces and nightly disinfection at both facilities.







*“The real trick is in the planning. So much of the cost is variable — typically about 70%. Even 30% of costs that are fixed are also somewhat variable. If you’ve got enough foresight, done enough planning, and know months in advance the show is likely to be smaller, you can plan around that and further manage those costs.”*

*Brian Field, Interim President & CEO, Emerald  
(pictured below on the far right)*



The Emerald and Clarion teams at IGES in Pigeon Forge, TN. The companies collaborated for the first time to market and promote the two events as Tennessee Market Week.



*“It doesn’t hurt that this is still a pretty healthy industry. The fact that 70% of the market still said, ‘I’m in business, and I’m willing to be here is,’ that’s important.”*

*Greg Topalian, CEO, Clarion  
(pictured below second from the left)*



The Clarion and Emerald teams at the SMGS in Gatlinburg, TN. Leading up to the events, IGES and SMGS held weekly meetings to discuss co-marketing, health and safety measures, track exhibitor and registration trends, and determine consistent policies.





**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/>.

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