



## SISO/UFi Deeper Dive: Case Study on Las Vegas Market

International Market Centers produced the Las Vegas Market, the first event at its new Expo at World Market Center Las Vegas, and the first major trade show in Las Vegas in more than one year.



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“On the buyer side, 20-25% of the 90,000 attendees who’ve come to our markets in Las Vegas, Atlanta and High Point during the pandemic have been first-time visitors to our markets,” said IMC CMO Dorothy Belshaw.

## Overview

394 = the number of days from March 13, 2020 to April 11, 2021. That marks the time from the last trade show in Las Vegas since the pandemic to the first gathering of more than 250 people in the city that many would argue is the convention capital of the world.

CONEXPO-CON/AGG 2020 ended one day early in Las Vegas on Friday, March 13, due to growing concerns about COVID-19. Later that afternoon, U.S. President Donald J. Trump shut down the country for those very same reasons. The triennial show, owned and produced by the Association of Equipment Manufacturers (AEM), attracted 130,000+ attendees and was originally scheduled to end Saturday, March 14.

394 days later on April 11, International Market Centers (IMC) opened the Las Vegas Market with permanent showrooms, 200 temporary tradeshow exhibitors and 1,400 attendees from 30 countries and all 50 states. From April 11-15, the event was the first in the newly constructed Expo at World Market Center Las Vegas (WMCLV), a \$103 million investment by Blackstone, the private-equity owner of IMC.

The new Expo at WMCLV features 194,785 gross square feet of exhibit space, which is divisible into two halls — North with 97,684 gross square feet and South with 97,101 gross square feet — which can accommodate up to 1,000 booths. The venue offers an expansive lobby area, registration area, onsite shuttle bus depot, attached parking garage and two permanent grab-and-go food service areas.

The building is part of the WMCLV, a complex that features 5 million square feet of permanent showrooms in three buildings and the new Expo, located next to the Premium Outlets and down the street from the Smith Center for the Performing Arts.

On April 9, Las Vegas Mayor Carolyn Goodman (former Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman's wife) and Las Vegas City Councilman Cedric Crear gathered with IMC executives and invited guests to celebrate the official ribbon cutting of what the city and IMC hope will generate economic impact for the community for years to come. The building was completed and ready to open for the Las Vegas Market in July 2020, but due to COVID restrictions, the new venue wouldn't house exhibits until April 2021.

"These buildings are truly a statement, and I want to thank Blackstone for their investment," said Goodman. "The Expo is the jewel of the desert in

### Show Dates and Location

#### Las Vegas Market

**Dates:** April 11-15, 2021

**Location:** World Market Center Las Vegas (Buildings A, B and C) and The Expo at the World Market Center in Las Vegas



the heart of downtown, and it's nirvana for smaller conventions. This center, along with this show to be the first to open, is so greatly significant. Despite the pandemic, we in the city of Las Vegas have done everything to keep in compliance with state restrictions. It's been a difficult year, and we are excited to have people back."

Councilman Crear, who was born and raised in Las Vegas, added: "Conventions are the lifeblood of our city, and we understand the value of convention business. Conventions drive midweek business. It's vitally important that we bring conventions back. We are the convention capital of the world. I remember when there

was nothing here for decades. This is historic and a gamechanger for the people, hotels and restaurants downtown in my district."

Indeed, conventions and trade shows generate "\$60 billion in economic impact in Southern Nevada, according to the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority," said IMC Chairman and CEO Bob Maricich at the ribbon cutting. "COVID has dampened that impact over the last year, but today we take the first steps toward recovery with the debut of this new facility and the opening of Las Vegas Market. Nowhere in the world offers 5.5 million square feet of space with showrooms, an exhibit hall, parking, and so much more."

In this white paper, SISO and UFI take a deeper dive to offer insight into how IMC was able to open the Expo to produce the first trade show in Las Vegas in more than one year. IMC implemented extensive health and safety protocols that had to be approved by the Southern Nevada Health Department and provided a safe market for the many buyers and sellers who were ready to get back to business and meet face-to-face.

### Looking back

Las Vegas had been virtually shut down since March 13, 2020. The government restricted gatherings of more than 250, making it nearly impossible for events held in Las Vegas to even consider moving forward.

IMC submitted its Las Vegas Market plans for approval by the Southern Nevada Health Department. After weeks of making changes,



"This center, along with this show to be the first to open, is so greatly significant," said Las Vegas Mayor Carolyn Goodman.

the plan was finally approved 60 days out from the show.

Typically held twice a year, the Las Vegas Market offers a full range of gift, home décor and furniture resources, presented in both permanent showrooms and temporary exhibit spaces. The April 2021 Las Vegas Market (typically held in January but postponed due to COVID) drew temporary exhibitors in six categories, including gift, design, handmade, home, immediate delivery and luxe. Previously, the temporary exhibits were held in pavilions in the parking lot — which was bearable in the winter but not so much in the summer in the desert.

On the first day of the Las Vegas Market, the Expo opened with a 50% capacity limit, allowing for a maximum of 6,000 attendees. On May 1, the state of Nevada lifted restrictions, returning to 100% capacity with approvals by the Southern Nevada Health Department no longer necessary for trade shows and events. That could of course change at any moment due to COVID spikes.

While most associations have sat on the sidelines, independent show organizers, like IMC, have been producing shows throughout the pandemic.

“IMC’s hybrid approach to markets — with both permanent showrooms and temporary exhibits — was a real differentiator, and a key reason why we were granted the shopping mall classification that allowed our markets to continue to operate while other trade shows were prohibited,” said Maricich.

Since June 2020, IMC has produced 18 markets in Atlanta, High Point and Las Vegas. The events



**“We brought exhibitors back in at a 20% discount,” said IMC CMO Dorothy Belshaw.**

have attracted 90,000 attendees.

### Building buyer loyalty

Throughout the pandemic, IMC was focused on continuing to build customer loyalty on the buyer side. “The value that we offer to buyers is really two-fold,” said IMC CMO Dorothy Belshaw. “The breadth and depth of resources is most important, it’s also about customer experience, and it matters. When we launched gift in Las Vegas, there were markets out there that were bigger. There were markets that had more diversity of product, but we delivered an exceptional experience and that helped us build and retain



attendance as we grew the market.

For example? “We are committed to one-to-one marketing,” Belshaw said. “We have call centers in Las Vegas and in Atlanta, and we make about 250,000 outbound calls a year.” In addition to its separate customer-service call centers, the IMC team keeps in close personal touch with all prospects — from buyers who have registered but not attended in the past to those who are frequent buyers.



Digital badge assistants were available to answer questions and remind people to us the digital badge.

“If they’ve never been to market, we talk to them about what market provides and how it can meet their needs,” Belshaw said. “It’s very relational. And those relationships matter when those buyers come on campus, they’re looking for the person they spoke to on the phone. We have agents in our call centers who have worked here for many years, and they know the buyers they speak to.”

In addition, IMC has six staff members in buyer engagement that work with specific groups of buyers. Training is critical, and IMC invests significantly in buyer relations and customer service instruction.

“We do hours and hours of training not only with our own staff, but also with the hundreds of temps that we bring in,” Belshaw said. “Las Vegas has always been known as the friendliest market in the industries that we serve.”

Maricich added: “We bring in about 1,200 temps for a normal size market. We basically do hospitality training 101. Look people in the eye. If you see a badge, call them by name and the only wrong answer is ‘I don’t know.’ Our mantra since the beginning has been to make market effective, efficient, and compelling for buyers. And if it is, you win the day with the buyer.”

That strategy appears to be working. April 2021 attendance at Las Vegas Market was up 346% over a scaled-back summer 2020 market, which featured permanent showrooms and no temporary trade show exhibits. “On the buyer side, 20-25% of the 90,000 attendees who’ve come to our markets in Las Vegas, Atlanta and High Point during the pandemic have been first-time visitors

to our markets,” said Belshaw.

## Surviving the pandemic

The commercial real estate business on the showroom side and the trade show business were not exactly the ideal sectors to serve during the pandemic. Tenants, buyers and IMC were all impacted by COVID. Some thrived, some barely survived. For most, the pandemic was a rollercoaster of ups and downs. In the beginning, IMC instituted a reduction in compensation for its entire staff and offered a rent relief program for permanent tenants.

Maricich explained how it worked: “At a high level, we offered everybody the same deal. Our business is not about picking winners and losers. Our business is a true marketplace. If they were a permanent tenant, they effectively had an option to pay 50% of their rent for five and a half months. I’m not aware of any commercial real estate company in North America that did anything like that. It was all based on our position that we are deeply embedded and deeply supportive of a partnership with the industry. We wanted the industry to survive as much unscathed as possible. The biggest surprise that came out of this was how few real bankruptcies there were.”

How did IMC’s customers survive? “Part of it was PPP,” Maricich said. “It saved a lot of our tenants and customers. It was highly effective. It was money well spent.”

For IMC, “We didn’t furlough anyone,” Maricich said. “We are proud of that. That’s a big deal. Our

team basically worked for nine months with a 20% reduction in compensation. For the first time in our company history, we didn’t pay a bonus. So the team made incredible sacrifices.” Since then, compensation has been fully restored for IMC’s 560 employees, he said. The company, which in January 2020 fortuitously announced the launch of a new digital innovations division, was hiring on the tech side throughout the pandemic, Belshaw said.

Of 3,000 tenants, IMC only lost 56 during the pandemic. “Some of them went out of business, but some of those are not long-term losses,” Belshaw said.

Maricich added: “It doesn’t take a great deal of capital to resurface in the industries we serve. We’re not in the electronics industry where it’s a \$100 million dollars to bring out a new iteration of a product. You can do some of this stuff in your garage or basement. It is incredible entrepreneurialism. The trade show part of our business in particular is really a cauldron of business development and creativity. I can’t tell you how many people I bump into that say ‘I started in the trade show area maybe five years ago, and then 15 years ago I got my first little showroom with 1,000 feet. Now, here I am 3,000 feet.’ We are great partners getting there. And invariably it’s a woman and invariably her daughter will be there. It’s super rewarding.”

On the trade show side, “We brought exhibitors back in at a 20% discount,” Belshaw said. “Now our customers’ businesses are pretty strong. There are certain types of apparel that did really well during the pandemic. In home furnishings

most had their best-ever year, and a lot of gift categories also had a really strong year. The primary challenge now is supply chain delays and disruption. So the businesses are strong. They just need to regain comfort with the trade show model and travel.”

## Health & Safety

IMC has been committed to safety from day one. “In a month that we have a major event, like January, we spent about \$400,000 on PPE (personal protective equipment) for hygiene, safety and security — over and above what our normal costs are. So we’re effectively spending \$4 million more this year, just to be safe,” said Maricich.

Hosting an event in Las Vegas during COVID became a moving target. The plan was approved by the Southern Nevada Health Department about 60 days out. On April 11, Las Vegas Market was able to open with 50% capacity or 6,000 attendees in the building, said Jennifer Muna, CEM, VP Event Sales & Operations at IMC. Muna shared the key safety features, which included:

- Masks required
- Temperature checks with color-coded wristbands each day to show temperature was normal
- Four health screening questions answered before entry
- Pre-registration required, but attendees could register on-site via their phones
- Digital badge for contact tracing, no paper badge or lanyard. Badge scanned on the

way in and out of the show floor or complex

- Physical distancing throughout the building and a show floor with queuing areas marked with physical distancing stickers on the concrete floors (no carpeting) for 250 on one side and 150 on the other
- Booth occupancy limits based on square footage
- Constant cleaning and disinfection provided by United
- High surfaces were cleaned every hour (per state guidelines), taped off every other toilet and sink, 10-foot vs. 8-foot aisles (state required), one-way aisles, and two on-site inspections due to COVID
- No carpet (but that was not a state requirement)
- 8-foot barriers between registration/lobby area and temperature checks
- Added a second EMT area

## Attendee experience

With no shows on the West Coast for more than one year, buyers we interviewed said they were ready to restock. Buyers reported they felt more comfortable and confident with travel, especially with vaccinations on the rise. By early April, hotels in Las Vegas were seeing an uptick in leisure travelers as stimulus checks blanketed the country. All buyers interviewed were satisfied with the health and safety protocols in place, and there was not one complaint, except that management was maybe too strict in some areas.

A need to restock inventory was a common thread among buyers on-site. “I’m only getting 60% of what I order,” said Cyndee Revill, a gift shop buyer for three Peppercorn Casino properties



located outside of Salt Lake City. “It’s a challenge getting any product for our industry right now. I could sell more product if I had more product.” She said Las Vegas Market is her favorite show, but she also attends WWD, MAGIC, and the Atlanta and Dallas gift shows. She commented that IMC did “a great job with health and safety.”

What was the impact of COVID? The casino properties were “shut down for 10 weeks, but we bounced back because it’s close to Salt Lake, and we ended 2020 up over 2019,” she said. Revill was ordering for next season, buying for Christmas. “Orders have been plagued by container and port delays. I have appointments with vendors who don’t come to see me because of my location. I want to see products face-to-face, look at how they are displayed and the story they tell. Unfortunately, many items are backordered, and we automatically cancel any backorders. It’s not good for displays when you only get a portion of what is expected.” She planned on attending all days of the show.

Ease of seeing many vendors in one place over a few days is very effective for buyers, and new buyers are critical for growing companies. “We choose Las Vegas Market for its easy access to showrooms and temporary exhibits,” said Rod Larue, owner of a 32-year-old family-owned furniture store business with 40 employees in Boca Raton, FL. He hadn’t attended a show since the pandemic. He said health and safety measures were “excellent. I give them a 10.”

His goal at the show? “New products, new designs, and vendors with quick inventory,” he said. Larue reported a shortage in inventory,



During the pandemic, IMC offered a rent relief program for permanent tenants.

due to an increase in sales of 20% in 2020 over 2019, even though the store was closed for seven weeks. “People were spending more time at home, so they were spending money on their house.”

### Exhibitors seeking new markets

One common theme among exhibiting companies: Expansion into the West Coast. Las Vegas Market offers access to qualified buyers, with 69% of attendees from the western U.S., and the top three states represented were CA, NV and AZ.

IMC reported some return exhibitors who hadn’t participated in a few years but were customers in other IMC events. For example, Ann Gish,

a 30-year-old top-of-bed company with 12 employees, including Derrick Ricketts, National Sales Manager. “We exhibited at High Point in October, which was great. We only missed our numbers by 5%. Buyers were serious, there was definitely quality over quantity. We also exhibited in January in Dallas. Both were successful, and we were very happy. It’s been eight years since we have exhibited at Las Vegas Market. IMC didn’t have High Point in April (postponed to June). We didn’t want our sales reps to have to travel all over to meet with individual buyers, so we decided to come. It’s a beautiful building.”

The impact of COVID on business? “From March to May, sales plummeted. We didn’t travel from March to June 2020, but since then, bookings are up 50% over last year. Business is great, and we can ship. We have no shipping issues, and only one container got held up. We added custom draperies to our product lineup.”

He said the company closed its show room in Atlanta last year but is trying to open its West Coast business and build a team. He has been traveling for one year and reported that vaccines are building more confidence. “IMC has done a great job promoting its health and safety measures.” The company is planning to exhibit at High Point in June and October, and he said he may come back to Las Vegas Market in August, depending on the ROI from the April show.

Small and mid-size businesses not only use shows as a springboard for regional growth but also as a path for new customers to find them. “The show is a platform for West Coast expansion, to grow this region,” said Kurt

Schroeder with Hobo Bags, a 30-year-old family-owned leather business with 80 employees near Annapolis, MD. “Shows are the best way to get new business. We also exhibit in Project in August and Coterie in September.”

The impact to the business from no shows during the pandemic? “We hired reps who did produce some hotel shows,” he said. “We’ve exhibited at this show before, in the pavilions for two summers. This new building is beautiful and amazing, and I am really happy to be here. We want to support this show because there are not many for us in Los Angeles.”

Hobo Bags has leased show rooms in New York, Atlanta, and Dallas. Currently the company has permanent showrooms with IMC in Atlanta at the apparel building for the last 23+ years. “This is my first trade show since the pandemic,” he said. “We have appointments with new prospects and existing customers.”

His goal for the show? “We want to break even,” Schroeder said. “We are not up to where we were before COVID, but we are coming back now. I feel comfortable with travel after receiving one dose of the vaccine so far, and I’m excited to get back to face-to-face. We are showing our summer and fall collections, and we have a big online presence. During the pandemic, we produced Facebook showings, and it’s paid off.”

Other small business owners were anxious to return to the show floor. “I exhibit in two shows per month in a typical year,” said Maria Del Francia, Owner of the Florida-based Brazilian Bra Straps, a 15-year-old accessory company that



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produces new designs each year. She exhibits in the Atlanta Market and in New Orleans. “Face-to-face makes a difference. People want to see and touch it. This is my third show since COVID. It was hard at the beginning. I do shows but learned to work online. I’m hoping I can keep up with both.” She was impressed with the health and safety protocols.

“It’s hard to reach new customers online,” said exhibitor Mark Bretheim with Cose Nouvelle, a gift and kitchenware company whose last show was in February 2020 in New York. The company typically exhibits in 20 shows per year, including New York, Las Vegas, Atlanta and Minneapolis.

“Business has been good, but we can only do so much online. I came because of vaccinations.” Market research is another benefit of exposure to buyers and media at events. “We bring prototype products and get feedback for designers on new products,” said Henrik Stepanyan, Lovinflame Inc., a company that sells tabletop fire features. “Buyers know what they want,” said Stepanyan, who has exhibited at the Las Vegas Market for three years. “We added a pedestal to a tabletop fire feature based on attendee feedback. That is now one of our most popular sellers.”

He added: “We are excited about the new building, and this is our first show since the pandemic. We got a lot of traffic on day one.” Previously, the company has exhibited in Chicago and Atlanta Markets, HD Expo, and the National Hardware Show. What other shows does he plan to exhibit in 2021? “We may go all out post COVID, in a positive way. Trade shows are an important tool for us.”

## What’s next

The summer 2021 Las Vegas Market, which was postponed from its regular dates in July, is scheduled for Aug. 22-26 at the Expo at the World Market Center Las Vegas. In addition to Las Vegas, IMC produces 22 markets — with both permanent showrooms and temporary exhibits — per year in Las Vegas, Atlanta and High Point, NC, as well as the annual Light Fair tradeshow, which will be held this October in New York’s Javits Convention Center.





**Bob Maricich**  
IMC Chairman and CEO

*“COVID has dampened that impact over the last year, but today we take the first steps toward recovery with the debut of this new facility and the opening of Las Vegas Market.”*



### Keys to contactless registration and digital badges

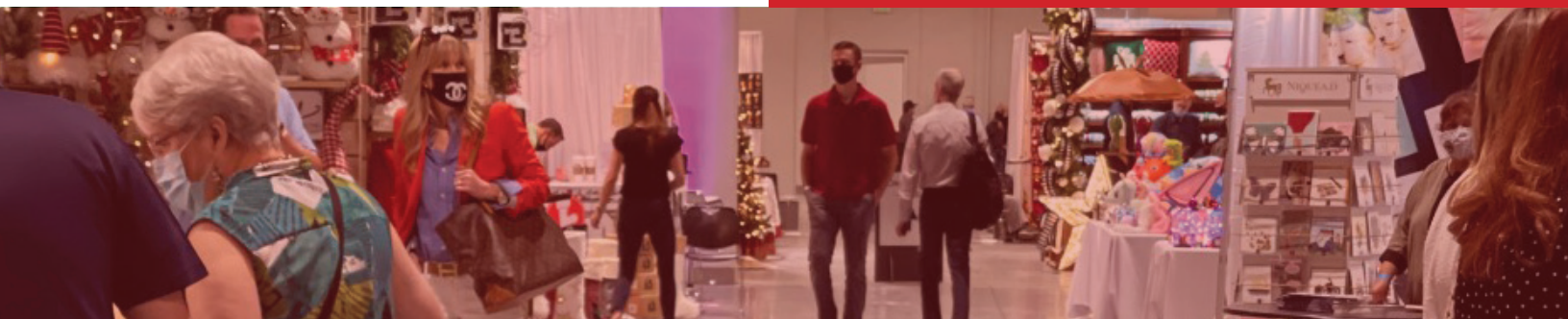
Like other organizers during the pandemic, IMC used digital badges only and offered contactless registration. No paper badges or lanyards. Attendees were scanned in and out of the exhibit hall for contact tracing purposes, which was required by the Southern Nevada Health Department for approval to host the show April 11-15 (restrictions have since been lifted).

After registering, attendees received a text with a link to a digital badge that could be saved in an Android or iPhone wallet. “CDS worked with Apple,” said Kita Lewis, CEM, Registration Director at IMC. “The design has a boarding pass feel to it. The digital badges were scannable for leads.”

### Other factors to consider:

- Good wi-fi in the building is essential for digital badges
- All registration could be completed on a phone
- Digital badge assistants were available to answer questions and remind people to use the digital badge. No need to wait in line
- QR codes could be scanned and easily re-sent through the system
- Everyone was scanned going in and out of the exhibit hall/complex so density could be tracked

“We can tell what time frame they were there,” Lewis said. “The health department required it for contact tracing. We had two exits and one entrance, with registration online 24-hours a day. We had one cycle of digital badges in August 2020, but this was the first time for the temporary exhibits. There was lots of room for queuing (250 spots with floor stickers near the shuttle drop off, 150 spots near the parking garage). CDS is a great partner. This digital badge was our brainchild together. It was formatted for your wallet, which makes it easier to save and scan.”





**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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