

Exhibition World

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Easy does it

Eric Everard takes the
lead at UFI

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The Global
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Climbing mountains with UFI



UFI welcomes a new president this month. Eric Everard, executive chairman at Belgium-based Easyfairs and Artexis, speaks to *EW* about the association and the future of exhibitions.

November's UFI Congress, held at the Marina Bay Sands resort in Singapore, sees the association welcome a popular face to the role of president.

Eric Everard, who takes over from Manfred Wutzlhofer, is the executive chairman of Belgium-based Artexis, the company behind low-cost exhibition specialist Easyfairs. Here Everard speaks to *EW* about his views on the industry, UFI and Easyfairs and hints at what's in store for the year ahead.

How did you get into the international exhibition business?

In 2011, I will celebrate a quarter century in the exhibition industry. When I was 22 years old I launched the European Student Fair. Four years later I sold it to Reed Exhibitions

and subsequently became the managing director for Reed Belgium, Reed Benelux and then, in 1995, for Reed Midem in Paris.

You cannot learn to be an entrepreneur but you can learn to be a better exhibition organiser. I owe a lot to my years at Reed. It really is one of the best universities for the industry - a few years at Reed gives you a highly specialised and yet broad-ranging education, the equivalent of a "Masters in Exhibitions Administration" I suppose. You can learn about all aspects of the business. Plus, you make a lot of great contacts.

Reed is to the exhibition industry what Procter and Gamble is to consumer goods - it's an informal club that stays with you throughout your professional life. In addition, I am fortunate to have been born a Belgian national who is half German. I regard Europe as my country and have

have a great culture and heritage. We exist to make our members' businesses more successful. This is the value we bring to them.

I would like to be able to communicate this more clearly in the future. Global communications with limited resources is a big challenge and all the more so in a multimedia environment. While some UFI members want to hear from us on Twitter, LinkedIn and via their iPads, others are finding it hard to say goodbye to printed directories and glossy brochures.

UFI has also played a leading role in internationalising the exhibition industry and I see this work continuing. For many years the industry was dominated by Western Europe and North America, but now China is a major player, as are business hubs such as Dubai and Singapore. UFI can help foster good communication, cooperation and the sharing of best practice. The great thing about new members from developing countries is that they tend to be active and enthusiastic. UFI's challenge is to tap into that enthusiasm.

"We bring together associations on a regular basis and work closely with them as multipliers for our programmes, services and research projects. This is a win-win situation for us all."

Finally, we have to look at the business models of exhibitions and apply some fresh thinking to move with the times. Marketing budgets are tight so the old adage "time is money" has never been truer. Therefore we have to create an even better value proposition and communicate it very effectively.

At the same time we have to adapt our business model to be more sustainable. We should recognise and celebrate any initiatives among UFI members to be exemplars of sustainable profitability in the exhibition industry – because this is now a business basic, not a "nice to have" or a piece of window dressing. Our online sustainable development knowledge exchange available to our members is just the first of many initiatives we have in mind.

Will you be focusing on the international associations?

Absolutely. UFI really values the relationship we have developed with the 38 UFI member national and international exhibition industry associations.

UFI is truly a global umbrella for the exhibition community. We bring together these associations on a regular basis and work closely with them as multipliers for our programmes, services and research projects. This is a win-win situation for us all. If we want to maximise our resources and avoid duplicative effort, this is certainly the best way for us all to go.



Eric Everard

never had any difficulties doing cross-border business.

What are the key challenges that face UFI in the next 12 months?

To demonstrate the value of exhibitions and tradeshows as a communications instrument in a changing world. We like to say that marketing doesn't get any more direct than a tradeshow. There is simply no substitute for face-to-face contact. And this is borne out by research that shows that exhibitors believe exhibitions are the most effective form of communication in terms of ROI. Surveys also show that even non-exhibitors recognise the value of exhibitions. So our challenge is to get them actually exhibiting.

We really want all of our members know to that UFI is focused on adding value to their businesses. We don't exist simply due to the fact we are 85 years old or because we

The 77th UFI Congress is in Singapore. Where does South East Asia sit in the bigger picture of international exhibitions?

I don't think anyone doubts we will continue to see strong economic growth in the South East Asian countries. There is a fantastic opportunity for that region to continue to develop strongly in the international exhibition industry over the next few years. There is real potential in Vietnam and Indonesia, and Thailand is definitely ahead of the curve with its professional development of the exhibition industry.

The venue of this year's UFI conference is a quite exceptional location. The Marina Bay Sands, one of the most impressive exhibition hall and congress complexes that I have ever seen, has been beautifully conceived by the architect Moshe Safdie.

What are your views on emerging technological trends in the international exhibition industry? Is social networking of any real benefit and are exhibitors crying out for RFID?

I think we are all still struggling a little to understand the benefits and consequences of social media. People made similar claims about email and internet and of course both of these – one could argue – also keep exhibitions alive. Social media does help to reinforce the feeling of community around an event. And it can also successfully bridge the time between events by maintaining interest in the exhibition and in its theme. But social media is no substitute for face-to-face contact, any more than the telephone or email, and social media must be controlled or it can become an unproductive drain on people's time.

To be honest, RFID scares the pants off me! I think there are some real privacy issues involved and I don't like the idea of humans being tracked in the same way you would track a manufacturing component. On the other hand it will make an impact on the exhibition industry as elsewhere. Some say it will enhance the visitor's experience but I have yet to be convinced and the privacy issues must be addressed.

There's no doubt that technology has become an integral part of today's communications process. The exhibition industry will use it, build upon it, depend upon it, and help to encourage its good use as best we can. Quite exciting times, don't you agree?

Should there be another global financial crisis tomorrow, what would you advise is the best way to protect your business? Cloning events abroad or expanding into other live event formats?

It is the same as for every business; You have to create and communicate value. I would not feel compelled to diversify. Rather, I would invest in enhancing my existing products – which already have a very clear visitor proposition – with even better content and innovations that deliver more value for the visitor's time.

Plus of course you have to manage costs very



“The real obstacle to international expansion is protectionism. If the exhibition industry does not take care of protectionism, protectionism will take care of us.”

carefully. This is where Easyfairs has a clear competitive advantage over some of the larger organisers and halls.

So again, if anybody is reading this who is experiencing difficulties, please get in touch, because we would be delighted to help out.

Has Easyfairs formed any joint ventures or other partnerships recently?

We have established joint ventures to set up easyFairs operations in Colombia, Poland and Russia in the past three years. We are open to opportunities for further partnerships but we are very keen to preserve our independence and the integrity of the Easyfairs brand.

Are you now looking to launch an acquisition drive?

Our core strategy is to double in size in the countries where we are already doing business within the next five years, and that will be a combination of organic growth and acquisitions.

We certainly aim to make further targeted acquisitions that fit within our portfolio. This was the case with both Nationwide in the UK and Fairtec, which we recently acquired in Belgium. We are currently exploring some very interesting opportunities in Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and Ireland.



In particular we have been in touch with large venues that are having difficulties maintaining smaller shows. I like to say that easyFairs is designed like a speedboat, able to react very quickly. We are process rather than project-driven so we can run smaller shows more easily and efficiently. So long as there is a market for a show we will introduce the content and the cost-effective format that will restore it to profitability. And that is always good news for the exhibitor and visitor communities.

Are there any countries or regions that you would particularly like to enter, or expand Easyfairs' business in, over the next 24 months? Are there any issues you would like to see addressed in order for you to do business there more successfully?

The real obstacle to international expansion is protectionism. If the exhibition industry does not take care of protectionism, protectionism will take care of us.

If we are to survive in the new business climate then we cannot cling to outdated practices that are a dead weight on the natural creativity and dynamism of the best people in our industry. In many countries things are not changing fast enough. Protectionism has certainly hampered our growth plans in Latin America where entrenched interests are often very resistant to change and

entrepreneurialism. It is a shame, because the people who suffer most are locally based businesses.

What would you be doing if you weren't executive chairman at Easyfairs?

I wear several hats so there is enough to keep me fully occupied outside Easyfairs, especially now with the UFI presidency. For example I am also executive chairman of Artexis, one of Belgium's largest public exhibitions organisers, and owner-manager of four of Belgium's largest exhibition and conference complexes. I am a father of four, which can also be a full-time occupation especially now that my children are in their teenage years.

But my real passion is for mountaineering. If I could, I would spend a lot more time scaling the greatest peaks in Europe and beyond.

If you never had to work again, what would you do with your time?

This question is very difficult for me to answer as I intend to work until I draw my last breath. I am very passionate about the exhibition industry so I expect to spend more time supporting new projects as an investor or business angel. I love to have new projects and set myself new goals.

Do you support any football teams?

I have many interests and passions in life but professional football is not one of them. However I do turn out for Easyfairs HQ when we play our national managing directors – and that is a fixture that always inflames passions.

For an extended version of this interview, including content on Easyfairs' plans for the future, log on to <http://www.exhibition-world.net>

Who is Eric Everard?

1964	Born in Uccle, Brussels
1988	Founded the European Student Fair
1991 – 1995	Managing director Reed Exhibitions Benelux (Reed-Elsevier Group)
1995 – 1996	Director Reed Midem, Paris (Reed-Elsevier Group)
1997 – 2000	Partner of direct marketing company KI Partners
1997	Founded Artexis, leading organiser of tradefairs and consumer shows in Belgium
2001	CEO and shareholder of Best of Group SA
2002	Acquisition and management of the exhibition halls in Antwerp and Namur
2004	Invented "the Easyfairs concept" of time and cost-effective tradeshows
2007	Acquisition of Flanders Expo
2009	Elected incoming president of UFI