

Death of SUPERCOMM

By *Tim Young*

For any non-nerds in the audience, please excuse me while I geek out a little. In 1932, Siegel and Shuster created an American icon. In 1938, that icon appeared in Action Comics #1. Faster than a speeding bullet. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Often confused for a bird (or a plane).

In 1988, TIA and USTA created a telecommunications icon. That icon appeared in various cities, and played venues from the Georgia Dome to Las Vegas. Bigger than a bursting bubble. Able to circulate tall buzzwords in a single day. Often confused for... any other massive tradeshow at Chicago's McCormick Place.

Superman. SUPERCOMM. They share more than just a first name.



But he didn't stay dead. He was immediately replaced by an array of spinoffs with names like "Man of Steel" and "The Metropolis Kid", which each seemed meant to grab a section of the comic book demographic. Doomsday didn't kill Superman. A desire to maintain relevance in the market did.



In 1992, that first icon met his inexplicable end. The creative minds behind him saw a changing audience and decided that it was time to shake things up. Superman was killed. He met his end at the hands of a guy named (subtly) "Doomsday".

In 2005, a similar decision was made regarding SUPERCOMM. USTA and TIA split and each formed their own event based on a slightly different vision about the future of the industry. TelecomNEXT and Globalcomm had to divide tradeshow marketing

dollars, and neither show captured the preeminence of SUPERCOMM. The two made up and formed NXTComm, which eventually gave way to a SUPERCOMM redux. Then, just a few weeks ago, it was announced that there would be no SUPERCOMM 2010. The fate of future SUPERCOMMs is undecided, but for the moment, SUPERCOMM is no dead.

Some had predicted this for years. The entire communications landscape has changed. Electronics have a sexy outlet at CES. Wireless has a sexy outlet at Mobile World Congress. Cable and wireless firms in the US have more successful shows, and telcos aren't sure that tradeshow are the answer, leaving vendors without an audience, reluctant to spend the big bucks the big shows require.

However, I don't want this to be a mere postmortem for SUPERCOMM (for whom this 'death' may not be final). I want to extend this concept to the entire convention (pardon the pun) of trade shows, in general. Are they still relevant? Do they still matter? Is this how people still want to do business?

Part of the woes that events are feeling right now have to do with the general state of the economy. Reports on CES attendance show a 20% decrease in the number of techies roaming that expo floor. CNET has been reporting on the issue of diminished trade show attendance since 2002 (which, admittedly, was at the end of another rough patch for the economy of the industry). All around, things have been better. Money is tight. Travel bans are on.



There are, in short, more targeted shows on the market. Shows that are rooted in intuitive conferences that give background and insight on industry problems and solutions. Shows that combine the extremely practical with the totally conceptual. Shows that draw people in. SUPERCOMM had ceased to be quite that kind of show.

But is it more than that? Concerns about the cost and even the environmental implications of hitting the road for a trade show have tarnished the cachet of the event. The large number of events has made allocating dollars more difficult, and has made audiences more widely dispersed.

Let's drill down to telecommunications, specifically. Our entire industry is designed around enabling people to have access to anyone or anything at any

time from where they are at that moment. We endeavor to bring the world to the customer. At the same time, we're going to demand that when we need to check out new technologies or make sales presentations, we need to be standing in a convention hall, eating a box lunch, with hair that smells faintly of hotel shampoo? It's counterintuitive.

Furthermore, drilling down to the level of OSS/BSS: What is it that we can show in person that we can't show remotely? We can run demos, but those demos are generally the sort of thing that could be easily viewed online. This industry was made for remote events!

So it must be an issue of the personal touch. Personal contact. Putting names with faces. There are other options for this, as well. Many vendors now just use trade shows as places for meetings with existing clients and prospects. So what's the advantage of the booth? Increasingly, many vendors are answering this question by skipping the booth, altogether, opting for meeting rooms or hospitality suites, instead. Over time, are booths just a vestige? A habit? A monument to a bygone era?

We, as an industry, can take the (probable) death of SUPERCOMM as a chance for reflection. Is this a singular event, or a glimpse of the future of events, as a whole? Superman returned, but he was never quite the same. Was it Superman that had changed? Or had the world around him changed?

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