

## Do Rights Professionals Need Book Fairs? The Frankfurt De-Brief

Back in the summer of 2020, as the rights community contemplated a full year without attending a physical book fair, we carried out a survey to assess the mood of rights professionals – how did they feel about slogging around the globe for long days in airless exhibition halls and did they feel that virtual alternatives would work? The results, overwhelmingly in favour of physical book fair attendance but with some important modifications, can be seen in our report [here](#).

Following the Frankfurt Digital fair we thought it would be a good idea to circle back and see what rights professionals' specific experience of Frankfurt had been and what we could learn from that, both in terms of re-thinking our approach to future fairs (physical or virtual) and to feed back to fair organisers about what will be useful in future. We conducted a follow up survey in November and were delighted to be able to present our findings at the December Rights2gether networking event.

In this post we highlight some of the key points that came out of the survey. We had 44 respondents, over half of whom had participated in the previous survey. 93% of those responding would usually attend Frankfurt (physical) book fair. The majority of respondents came from trade publishers but there was also a good level of representation from academic, educational and professional publishers. 70% of respondents were from the UK, with other respondents based in Europe and North America.

### Frankfurt Hosted Initiatives

---

*“All in all it's a lot of work for no business, but you felt you needed to partake to be seen to be there”*

---

The first part of the survey focused on the specific initiatives that Frankfurt Bookfair had put on. There was good overall awareness of them but 2/3 of respondents had not been aware of everything that was on offer. Almost 25% of people found it difficult to participate in the Frankfurt initiatives.

---

*“The release date of Frankfurt Rights was just too close to the actual fair and I was in the middle of meetings already. Also it was crashing quite often. It needs a lot more work!”*

---

Looking at the particular initiatives on offer, Conferences and The Hof (Zoom social, with topical speakers, chair yoga and jazz!) came out on top with 96% and 86% respectively of those who attended, finding them useful. Conversely Matchmaking was considered of little or no use by over 75% of respondents, with Frankfurt Rights not faring well either with 61% saying it was of little or no use.

---

*“I reached out to some people through the matchmaking facility, but no one listed was really of use. If editors don't upload themselves onto that area there is no one to matchmake with...”*

---

In general people felt that participation in Frankfurt hosted initiatives involved additional (and unwelcome) work, they had experienced technical difficulties in logging in or trying to find what they were looking for on the site, and were disappointed in the lack of engagement from rights buyers (particularly in the case of Matchmaking and Frankfurt Rights).

---

*“A lot of customers who I sell rights to did not know about this platform at all. It seems it was only used by the publishers who sell rights but not those who buy them.”*

---

## Frankfurt Meetings

The main purpose of a book fair for rights professionals is to conduct meetings with prospective buyers, so we were keen to find out how well this had been managed in the virtual space. Zoom was the predominant method for hosting meetings, Teams and Google Hangouts also being used by respondents. Interestingly the time period in which meetings were held had been extended enormously from the standard 3-5 days typical of physical attendance. 50% of rights professionals had spent up to a month carrying out meetings whilst a further 36% reported meetings being carried out over a 1-3 month period, and a few even reporting meetings taking place over a 3-6 month time frame. It was not only the time period in which meetings were hosted, but also the duration of each meeting which had increased. At a physical fair, meetings are strictly limited to periods of 30 minutes, whilst in the virtual format 75% of respondents said meetings were between 30 and 60 minutes and only 20% reported meetings of 30 minutes or less.

---

*“The virtual meetings allowed more time with the customer however it also meant that I could not meet everyone who I normally meet with in person”*

---

The majority of respondents considered the meetings to have been as successful or slightly more successful than their usual meetings, this may well be due to the extended duration of each meeting. Respondents enjoyed the more relaxed nature of the meetings, which gave more time to pitch as well as to uncover more about buyers' interests (both business and personal!). However, this came at a cost in terms of the time commitment involved, and inevitably meant either fewer meetings or hosting meetings over a much longer time period which then had a knock-on impact on other work. Not all buyers were receptive to online meetings and time zone challenges meant people starting their day very early and ending late in order to accommodate them.

---

*“Time zones, a language barrier as well as issues with technology have been difficult to overcome, also some publishers just do not feel comfortable with having virtual meetings.”*

---

Many people commented on missing the buzz and adrenaline rush of a physical fair, which carries you through an exhausting schedule.

---

*“Nothing can replicate the feel-good feeling of the fair and the in-person connection you make when you meet in person”*

---

Without that, and with other work to get done between meetings, it was much harder to maintain the same level of enthusiasm and momentum. Importantly rights people were only having meetings with people they already knew. The missed opportunity to meet new contacts was a real concern amongst respondents, especially given the limited use of Matchmaking and Frankfurt Rights.

---

*“We missed out from passing trade enquiries that we would usually get at a physical fair.”*

---

## **Impact on Business**

Whilst a quarter of respondents felt it was too soon to make an assessment on the impact of their rights business from the switch to a virtual fair, almost half reported that they felt there was a small or significant decrease. Whilst 66% of respondents felt there had been missed opportunities, hearteningly 41% reported that they had seen some additional opportunities as a result of the shift. Amongst the new opportunities that had been grasped were the ability to meet with people who didn't ordinarily travel to Frankfurt, to fit in more meetings (although in some cases people felt they had been able to manage fewer) and to attend events that would usually clash with back-to-back stand meetings.

---

*“Because I did not have back-to-back appointments, I could join conferences and networking events which I would not be able to otherwise.”*

---

Lost opportunities included not being able to meet with people who didn't want to engage virtually, difficulty pitching products with high production values, which need to be seen up close to appreciate, inability to read body language so easily on a virtual call and not making new contacts.

---

*“Not having physical books around meant I only really sold very new, front list titles”*

---

We wanted to understand what the personal impact had been on participants and found a varied response. Whilst the virtual fair had caused additional stress for some, the burden had been eased for others and the opportunity for more relaxed meetings over the usual frenetically paced ones was welcome. 'Zoom fatigue' was mentioned by many, particularly those hosting meetings over an extended period and for buyers as much as rights professionals.

---

*“A lot of editors were too fed up with virtual meetings which is different to the physical book fair”*

---

A key issue was the lack of understanding from colleagues in other teams that there was a fair going on and being expected to participate in internal meetings and respond to emails, on top of customer meetings that might start early and finish late. The social side of physical attendance at fairs was missed as well – meeting customers and other rights professionals face to face gives people a buzz that can't be replicated and has impacted on people's enjoyment of their work.

## The Future of Fairs

So, what will the future look like? We asked respondents about their future plans and 93% responded that they would attend fairs both physically and virtually. 95% of respondents wanted to get back to physical meetings (mostly in addition to virtual) and over half wanted to engage with conferences and events (physical or virtual). There was less confidence about attending matchmaking and curated networking events and participation in virtual rights platforms. Social activities were the only fair activity that all respondents said they would or might participate in, with a strong preference for this being a physical rather than virtual activity!

Elements of the virtual fair that people would like to see continue include the online conferences and events (with catch-up options), being able to meet with those who wouldn't usually be able to attend, the Hof, and the reduced environmental impact that we've benefitted from this year. Suggestions for improvements included an on-line scheduling tool for meeting management, more consideration of the breadth of time zones of those attending, improvements to matchmaking and Frankfurt Rights – which have potential to be more useful than the experience of this year, more work on encouraging participation from rights buyers and a more user-friendly website.

As a result of the experience almost 80% of respondents reported that they would make a change to the way they work.

---

*“We plan to use more virtual meetings throughout the year to maintain relationships rather than just a once-a-year face-to-face meeting.”*

---

46% of people will be increasing the number of video meetings they carry out, 9% will make changes to marketing – using more digital tools, 8% will spread meetings across the year and 6% will reduce the number of trips or fairs attended.

## What have we learned?

For the majority of respondents, the most important part of the fair, whether physical or virtual, is meeting with rights buyers. That continued in the virtual space regardless of any participation in 'hosted' events from Frankfurt. For the bookfairs to be relevant in a virtual space they need to focus on helping rights professionals to meet new rights buyers. Much more work on matchmaking and networking are required in addition to more focus on the requirements of rights buyers and how to make the virtual fair work for them. In the physical space rights professionals cherish the personal interaction, so creating an environment that enables more opportunities for people to find one another and allows rights professionals to participate in events around their hectic meeting schedules would be welcome.

Virtual meetings are here to stay, and hybrid physical and virtual fairs will to some extent be the new normal. This will allow rights professionals to have a broader reach but will also have implications for their workloads. How to manage more meetings over a longer duration, in addition to important physical attendance at key fairs is a problem that will need to be addressed. The extent to which enthusiasm for virtual meetings amongst rights buyers will wain in future is as yet unknown, but its hard to imagine that rights buyers will be able to accommodate the increased impact on their time any more than rights professionals can. This year is certainly not a model for how people might work when there are choices to be made.

Whilst virtual bookfairs bring important benefits for inclusivity and the environment which should not be overlooked, the efficiency of attending the physical fair, the opportunity to make new connections and to build bonds with existing contacts are not easily replicated in virtual form. Whilst our surveys show there are many improvements to be made to both virtual and physical offerings, for rights professionals at least, the feeling is that physical bookfairs remain absolutely core to their business, albeit supplemented by carefully planned virtual additions.

## Takeaways

- Rights professionals have embraced virtual meetings, and these are likely to be used year-round to compliment attendance at physical book fairs.
- Rights Professionals feel meeting existing and new customers at physical book fairs remains the best way to do business.
- Virtual or Physical Events to support rights trading need to focus on engaging buyers as much as sellers and facilitate making new contacts
- Rights professionals would like to see more time for networking and professional development at book fairs.
- Fair organisers need to carefully consider how physical and virtual attendance can be integrated without compromising the experience of either.
- Organisers of virtual fairs need to up their game when it comes to the technology that is used to support them – platforms must be easy to use, easy to navigate and deliver good ROI (measured in time as well as cost) to users.
- The compromises and massive additional commitment made by both buyers and sellers to find a way of carrying on in 2020 was a one-off which had consequences – it is not a sustainable way to conduct rights business in the long term

## About RightsZone

**RightsZone** is cloud-based app hosted on the Salesforce platform which has been developed by Clare Hodder and Ruth Tellis of Rights<sup>2</sup>Consultants and Ribbonfish, the publishing technology experts. The app provides a rights management database together with leading CRM technology, elegant workflow tools and flexible analytics to support rights professionals in their day-to-day work. RightsZone boasts a range of forward-thinking publishers and agencies amongst its community of users including Taylor & Francis, Emerald, Unbound and DKW Literary Agency. More than just a software application, the RightsZone team works closely with its users as well as the broader community of rights professionals, to keep pace with the challenges rights teams are facing, developing creative ways to support them in growing their businesses.

Please **contact us** to arrange a chat if you would like to find out more.