

From a medieval marketplace to global trade fair partner

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Frankfurt has been a renowned trade fair site for more than 800 years. Back then, merchants and businessmen met at the “Römer”, a medieval building in the heart of the city that served as a market place; from 1909 onwards, they came together on the grounds of the new Festhalle.

The first Frankfurt trade fair that was documented in writing goes back to the year 1150, and the first highly official Frankfurt Autumn Trade Fair was approved and sealed in a letter by the Emperor Frederick II on 11 July 1240. The cosmopolitan Hohenstaufen emperor decreed that merchants travelling to the fair were under his and the empire’s protection, and signed this trade fair privilege for Frankfurt during the siege of the Italian city of Ascoli.

The Frankfurt Spring Fair received its privilege from Emperor Louis IV on 25 April 1330, and from this time onwards, trade fairs were held twice a year, in spring and autumn. Even at this early stage, the basic structure of today’s consumer goods exhibitions can be seen.

In the 16th century, the city of Frankfurt with its imperial privileges firmly established itself as a centre of international trade. The range of goods on offer was as diverse as the coins being used to purchase them until 1585, when the establishment of the Frankfurt Exchange brought order to the coins and bills of exchange, laying the foundation for the subsequent development of Frankfurt into the financial centre that it is today.

It was not to be the last time that the fortunes of the city and trade fair were intertwined, for more than 850 years of Frankfurt’s 1,200-year history have been spent as a trade fair city. The events of 1585 therefore provide a particularly clear example of just how closely trade, exhibitions and finance are linked in Frankfurt am Main.

Historical continuity

The city where numerous emperors were elected and crowned has long since developed into “Mainhattan”, a metropolis at the heart of the European finance and service industries. With more than 400 financial institutions and the European Central Bank, Frankfurt is now the financial capital of continental Europe. Yet a closer look reveals many areas where the historical continuity is still clear, areas that have shaped Frankfurt’s fortunes and history over the centuries.

This also applies to its geographical position at the crossroads of Europe, a position that has offered Frankfurt a priceless advantage since very early in its history and which is one of the foundations of its prosperity. Even in the Middle Ages, its location on the most important European trade route, from Paris via Frankfurt and Leipzig to Nizhny-Novgorod,

meant that the mediaeval imperial city was well integrated into international trade routes, routes which centuries later would find their modern equivalent in high-performance infrastructure. Today, Frankfurt is one of the world's most important hubs of road, rail, and air transport and data transfer.

Frankfurt trade fairs in the Middle Ages

Frankfurt's trade fairs have remained a key feature of the city throughout its development. Already in the time of Martin Luther, the "marketplace of Germany" had become a "bustling market for the goods of the world". As many as 40,000 people came to the trade fairs in this city on the Main River, a number even greater than the total population of "Francofurtia" at the time. Already in the early 17th century, as many as one quarter of the merchants came from abroad.

Frankfurt trade fairs enjoyed their first heyday as a centre for international trade, a golden age that brought prosperity through the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Even so, it was clear that the focus of European trade was shifting to the East. In Saxony in particular, a more liberal trade and industrial policy was pursued, and it was not until 1864 that the Free City of Frankfurt was able to follow suit.

The marked decline in the trade fair business in Frankfurt should also be viewed in light of the new forms of distribution. For many centuries, trade fairs had simply been the place where providers had brought their handmade goods to sell directly from their stands, which meant that the town turned into a giant goods depot whenever there was a fair. With the start of industrial production, however, the form of distribution changed, for series production and the large volumes with the same quality that this entailed meant that goods fairs were no longer necessary. As a result, more and more exhibitors came to the fair carrying only samples of their products. This marked the birth of the sample fair, a concept that would gradually become the norm.

Start of the modern era

It was not until the "Gründerzeit" era of the late 19th century that things began looking up again for Frankfurt's trade fair business. The primary reason for this was the new type of industrial technology exhibition. The first World Exhibitions in London (1851) and Paris (1855) heralded the start of this new type of national exhibition. Frankfurt also took part in this boom: industrial exhibitions, cooking exhibitions, agricultural exhibitions and the first automotive exhibitions, not to mention the hugely important International Electrotechnical Exhibition of 1891, all took place here and met with a tremendous response. These exhibitions – in conjunction with the modern sample fair concept – can be seen as an early incarnation of the specialised fair, otherwise known as the "Frankfurt system". Even in these early shows, there was already a clear separation between different fields and sectors, divisions that would become the decisive factor for the subsequent development of Frankfurt's trade fair policies.

One thing was very clear after the first large exhibitions: for such mammoth shows – not to mention the increasing number of large cultural events like the Deutsches Sängerefest (German Song Festival) and the Deutsches Turnfest (German Gymnastics Festival) – the city had too few buildings, and those that it did have were too small. The result of this realisation is well-known, for the construction of the Festhalle marked the creation of one of Europe's largest exhibition halls. It is the cornerstone of Ausstellungs- und Messegesellschaft mbH, the company founded in 1907 that is now known as Messe Frankfurt GmbH.

While the development of the new exhibition business was temporarily interrupted by the First World War, future Mayor Ludwig Landmann pointed the way forward in 1917 with the presentation of his business plan, which assigned trade fairs a central role in the development of the city and its economy. As soon as the war was over, preparations began for the International Import Fair, which opened on 1 October 1919. With more than 3,000 exhibitors over a total exhibition area of 16,500 square metres, the event was also a commercial success. The “Frankfurt principle” saw its first systematic application with the 1920 Frankfurt Spring Fair, and it became an important foundation for the success of Frankfurt's international trade fairs.

Frankfurt profited from the vibrant and sometimes hectic trading that took place during the 1920s, and from the city's propitious location near the French occupation zone. The Frankfurt trade fair expanded, establishing itself as an “all-round exhibition” with particular strength in the textiles and consumer goods sectors. The way was soon clear for the establishment of a new tradition. Already in 1920/1921, the “Haus Offenbach” administration building and the “Haus Werkbund” (Work Federation Building) were built, soon to be followed by the “Haus der Technik” (Technology Building), “Haus Schuh und Leder” (Shoe and Leather Building) and “Haus der Moden” (Fashion Building). The necessary infrastructure was established with the construction of warehouses, a rail connection to the freight terminal and the creation of food services operations. In 1920, the company was renamed Messe- und Ausstellungs-Gesellschaft mbH.

The 1929 Spring Fair marked a temporary end to the development of Frankfurt's universal fairs, for “Black Friday” and the global economic crisis gave rise to new types of trade fairs and exhibitions, and was followed by the development of specialised trade fairs and exhibitions.

The years during the Nazi regime

With the assumption of power by the Nazis and their implementation of autarchic economic policies, trade fairs and exhibitions were subsumed by ideology, and economic aspects became less important. The most important milestone in the company's development was AHEMA's commitment to Frankfurt in 1937. Plans to expand the exhibition grounds were frustrated by the Second World War. Following Reichspogromnacht (Night of Broken Glass), the Festhalle was used as a provisional prison for more than 3,000 Jewish citizens of the City of Frankfurt and the Rhine-Main region. They were deported to the Buchenwald and Dachau concentration camps. By 1945, 95 percent of the exhibition grounds had been destroyed. A bronze plaque commemorating the victims of the Reichspogromnacht can be found in the Festhalle forecourt and on the Rotunda.

Reconstruction and the “Frankfurt principle”

When, on 25 August 1946, Mayor Kolb announced that “Frankfurt is going to be a trade fair city once again,” he did this because he believed that reconstructing the trade fair would help kick-start the rebirth of the entire city.

The Frankfurt Trade Fair, held from 3 to 8 October 1948, carried on the tradition of Frankfurt's international trade fairs held from 1919 to 1929, and 1,771 exhibitors, of whom 46 were from outside Germany, played the role of pioneers at the first event. A total of 32 different industries presented their goods, ranging from textiles and machines to foodstuffs, drinks and tobacco, over a total of 60,000 square metres of exhibition area in

provisional lightweight constructions, tents or simply in the open air. More than 300,000 visitors were able to obtain a comprehensive overview of the full range of products on offer in the three western zones of occupation. The economic and psychological effects of the first autumn trade fair were enormous, both with regard to spurring foreign trade and for the reconstruction and expansion of the exhibition grounds.

There was yet another way in which the Frankfurt international trade fair played an important role in the birth of today's Messe Frankfurt, for the increasing diversity of the products on offer quickly created a trend towards greater specialisation of trade fairs, the "Frankfurt principle". The trend was kicked off in 1959 by Interstoff, a trade fair for apparel fabrics, and the first ISH followed in 1960. With Heimtextil, home and household textiles received their own trade fair in 1971, and the cancellation of the IAA in the same year led within a few short weeks to the development of Automechanika for automotive workshops and suppliers. 1980 saw the launch of Musikmesse, and in 1990, the International Spring Fair was reorganised into the Premiere and Ambiente trade fairs. In 1996, Premiere was split into Paperworld, Beautyworld and Christmasworld, while the Autumn Fair was rechristened Tendence. It is a process which continues today. Frankfurt's trade fairs are continuing to develop, and new ones are being added. At the same time, the range of services offered by Messe Frankfurt is continually being expanded through digital facilities, offering essential added value to customers.

High-performance centre for global marketing

Centuries of development have transformed a bustling market for the medieval world into a high performance centre for global marketing. The world's leading trade fairs for consumer goods, textiles, automotive technology, architecture and technology all have their home in Frankfurt am Main. Messe Frankfurt has exported successful brands such as Ambiente, Heimtextil, Automechanika, Light + Building and ISH around the globe, creating a global marketing instrument with the same high standard of quality for SMEs in particular.

Messe Frankfurt has become the city's "nerve centre", a term that refers to its positive socio-economic impact. Trade fairs always generate additional sales for Frankfurt and the surrounding region – whether it be in the catering and hospitality trade, stand construction companies or the taxi trade. This means that Messe Frankfurt plays an active role in protecting jobs in the Rhine-Main region. This is evident from a study on the positive socio-economic impact of Messe Frankfurt conducted by the Ifo Institute for Economic Research, an independent institute at Munich University. Messe Frankfurt generates purchasing power of Euro 3.6 billion outside the company's exhibition grounds. The trade fair business is responsible for some 18,500 jobs in Frankfurt alone as well as a total of approximately 33,260 jobs in Germany as a whole.

International strategy for global business

A look back shows us that trade fairs are products subject to all manner of external conditions and internal factors, and numerous events in the trade fair's more than 800-year history have proven this. The most important lesson is that traditional values and size alone are no guarantee of longevity or success, for trade fairs can very quickly become irrelevant when internal and external factors are not continuously reconciled. This is just as true today as it was 100 years ago.

Messe Frankfurt responded to the challenges posed by globalisation by promptly placing increased emphasis on investment in products and markets. The company held its first

trade fair outside Germany, Interstoff Asia, in Hong Kong back in 1987, and in 1990 it established its first foreign subsidiary, in Tokyo. For more than 30 years, Messe Frankfurt has been spanning the globe with its many brands. Moreover, it has been a model for success, as many of its events in other countries are – after the flagship events at our Frankfurt base – now the second or third biggest in their respective industries worldwide. Messe Frankfurt now has subsidiaries and branch offices in Stuttgart, Friedrichshafen, Paris, Milan, Guildford/Surrey, Istanbul, Atlanta, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Mumbai, New Delhi, Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Taipei, Johannesburg and Dubai. In 2003, the Asian subsidiaries in China, Japan, Korea and India were united under Messe Frankfurt Asia Holding Ltd., which is headquartered in Hong Kong. A closely knit network of more than 50 international sales partners, covering some 180 nations and 28 subsidiaries throughout the world, forms the basis for Messe Frankfurt's global orientation.

Today Messe Frankfurt is a global marketing and service partner for its customers. Messe Frankfurt is a name that stands for trade fairs and events of the highest quality and for outstanding customer service on a global scale. By pursuing a rigorous brand strategy, Messe Frankfurt has ensured that its international brands do far more than share a name with the flagship events in Frankfurt – they also share the same high standards.

Financial year 2020 brought about a historical break in the stable growth that Messe Frankfurt has enjoyed since the Second World War. Owing to the global coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing travel restrictions and quarantine regulations, physical events around the world were cancelled or restricted locally. Around two thirds of the events under the Messe Frankfurt umbrella had to be cancelled or postponed. A series of events were held as additional digital formats. Messe Frankfurt still had to contend with the effects of the pandemic in 2021, not least due to the ongoing volatile situation and worldwide travel restrictions. Similarly, hardly any events could be held in the first quarter of 2022 owing to the pandemic. After all the restrictions had been lifted in April, the first trade fairs started up again on Messe Frankfurt's exhibition grounds. Since then, events around the world have been very dynamic again – with personal interaction supplemented by digital elements, they remain the classic meeting places for their sectors.

Running the German Pavilion at Expo Milano 2015

On behalf of the Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs and Energy, Messe Frankfurt organised the construction and running of the German Pavilion at Expo Milano 2015. The theme for Expo 2015 in Italy was "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life". The country presentations centred on the key words food, energy, globe and life. The German Pavilion, "Fields of Ideas", showed new and surprising problem-solving approaches from Germany for producing food in the future. True to its motto, "Be active!", it invited visitors – some three million in all – to take action themselves.

Timeline

- 1150 First recorded reference to a trade fair in Frankfurt
- 1240 Emperor Frederick II grants Frankfurt the right to hold fairs and exhibitions and approves an autumn trade fair
- 1330 Emperor Louis IV allows Frankfurt to hold a second fair in spring
- 1585 Establishment of the Frankfurt Exchange lays the foundation for the development of Frankfurt into a financial centre
- 1891 International Electrotechnical Exhibition
- 1907 Establishment of Ausstellungs- und Messegesellschaft mbH, the company now known as Messe Frankfurt GmbH
- 1907 Construction of the Festhalle, one of the largest European exhibition halls of its time
- 1909 The Festhalle is officially opened by Emperor Wilhelm II
- 1909 The International Airship Exhibition takes place in Frankfurt, attracting more than 1.5 million visitors
- 1919 First Frankfurt international trade fair
- 1920/21 Transformation of the Festhalle site into a “trade fair city”
- 1920 The “Frankfurt principle” was applied systematically at the Frankfurt Spring Fair.
- 1933 During the Nazi regime, trade fairs were shaped by ideology, meaning that purely economic aspects took a back seat.
- 1938 Following Kristallnacht in 1938, the Festhalle was used as a provisional prison for more than 3,000 Jewish men from Frankfurt and the Rhine-Main region. They were deported to the Buchenwald and Dachau concentration camps.
- 1945 95 percent of the exhibition grounds was destroyed.
- 1948 Resumption of international Frankfurt trade fairs with the first “DM Fair”
- 1949 The first post-war Book Fair is held in Frankfurt
- 1951 The IAA motor show is relocated from Berlin to Frankfurt and experiences tremendous success until 2019
- 1959 The textile segment is spun off to create Interstoff
- 1960 First ISH
- 1971 First Heimtextil
- 1971 First Automechanika
- 1980 Musikmesse becomes an independent event
- 1987 Interstoff Asia takes place in Hong Kong – it is Messe Frankfurt’s first trade fair outside Germany
- 1990 Establishment of the first foreign subsidiary, in Japan
- 1990 The International Spring Fair is reorganised into the Premiere and Ambiente trade fairs
- 1996 The Autumn Fair is rechristened Tendence
- 1996 Premiere is split into Paperworld, Beautyworld and Christmasworld
- 2000 First Light + Building
- 2015 Organisation and running of the German Pavilion at Expo Milano 2015, on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (BMWi)
- To this day Ongoing development of the trade fair portfolio 2020
As a result of the global coronavirus pandemic and ensuing travel restrictions and quarantine regulations, the global trade fair business almost came to a standstill. Physical trade fairs cannot be held or are only possible in locally restricted forms.

- 2021 The pandemic continues to cause upheaval in the trade fair business due to the ongoing volatile situation and worldwide travel restrictions.
- 2022 Similarly, hardly any events could be held in the first quarter owing to the pandemic. After all the restrictions had been lifted in April, the first trade fairs started up again on Messe Frankfurt's exhibition grounds.

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