

FIRST CASE STUDY IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



THE IMPACT OF SHOWCASE FESTIVALS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR PARTICIPANTS



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EDITO

International music trade fairs play a decisive role in the structure and vitality of the music sector in general, and world music in particular. As hubs for economic, cultural and artistic exchange, these events offer producers a strategic platform for developing their activities on an international scale.

We will not dwell here on the essential role that these fairs play as key meeting places for producers, programmers, labels, distributors, agents and specialised media, or on the increased visibility, networking and creation of transnational partnerships that they offer, etc., as all this seems to be accepted by everyone. So much so that professionals (especially producers who have artists in showcases) incur significant costs to ensure their presence. It has also reached the point where networks such as Zone Franche are mobilising to be present at these fairs in Europe and Africa and, in our case, even coordinating the presence of the entire network and its members at WOMEX and Babel Music XP: shared stands, speed meetings, professional cocktail parties, financial support for members, occupancy and visibility strategies, etc.

All this is accepted and repeated every year, almost without question... However, we felt that this financial investment, as well as the human energy involved, deserved to take the time to assess the impact of these trade fairs on the development strategies of professionals.

So, with the help of researcher Michaël Spanu, we have been conducting preliminary surveys of professionals (particularly producers) and their expectations for the past two years, in order to identify what they consider to be the indicators and markers of success. Based on this, we developed the impact assessment questionnaire in 2024.

This document is an initial result following WOMEX 2024. It is important to note that the aim is not to focus solely on the impact of this edition of WOMEX, but to lay the groundwork for a more systematic evaluation of trade fairs and thus build a broader vision of how our music ecosystem works.

Sébastien Laussel
Director of Zone Franche

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, showcase festivals have established themselves as essential venues for the international development of artists and music professionals. Halfway between concerts, trade fairs and professional conferences, these events bring together thousands of delegates from labels, booking agencies, festivals, media and institutions every year. Unlike mainstream festivals, their aim is not to appeal to a wide audience, but to create opportunities for visibility, networking and collaboration for artists looking to break into international markets.

At the same time, public or hybrid organisations dedicated to export, which emerged in Europe in the 1990s, have played an increasing role in the development of these festivals. Their mission is to support the international circulation of music by financing, supporting and supervising the participation of artists and professionals in these events. Together, showcase festivals and export offices now form a veritable ecosystem where different rationales come together, relating to cultural policy, entrepreneurial development, and even soft power.

While this cooperation opens up real opportunities for artists and professionals from non-hegemonic markets, it is not without its tensions, particularly in relation to the difficulty of measuring its impact.

It is in this context that the present study is situated. It aims to analyse the financial and symbolic impact, feedback and perceptions of professionals who have participated in one of the most important showcase festivals: WOMEX. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the study highlights the benefits, limitations and prospects of trade fairs.

Michaël Spanu
Scientific director

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

55

organizations completed the survey

€2,000

median non-artistic costs incurred by organisations at WOMEX 2024

€4,500

median average artistic budget for showcases enjoyed by the 17 respondents

The survey was completed by 55 organizations, most of them based in Europe, 19 of which are members of Zone Franche. The respondents represent a broad spectrum of organizational profiles, with founding years ranging from 1978 to 2025. On average, these organizations are 18.8 years old (median: 18), reflecting a balance between both long-established and relatively young participants. They manage an average of 14 active artistic projects (median: 10), with an average annual turnover of €308,814 (median: €150,000). Roughly 30% of this turnover is export-related (median: 19%), highlighting the international orientation of many respondents.

In terms of engagement with WOMEX, the respondents reported an average of six participations in the last ten editions (median: 7). For WOMEX 2024 specifically, organizations allocated an average of €2,551 to non-artistic costs (median: €2,000). Among the 17 respondents who had a showcase, the average artistic budget reached €4,464 (median: €4,500). Subsidies played a partial role in financing participation: across the whole sample (including those with no support), the average subsidy amounted to €1,208, or around 25% of total budgets. However, the median was €0, showing that more than half of respondents received no subsidy. For those who did, the average amount rose to €2,555 (median: €1,000).

SALES OUTCOMES

€4,000

median sales directly linked to WOMEX 2024

38%

average of annual export turnover

Sales directly linked to WOMEX 2024 averaged €13,250, but the median stood at €4,000, a more representative measure of the typical experience. This discrepancy illustrates the effect of a small number of highly successful outliers that significantly raise the mean. For some respondents, WOMEX sales represented as much as 50% of annual turnover, though on average they accounted for 5.6% (median: 1.5%).

When considered in relation to export turnover alone, WOMEX's importance becomes more evident. WOMEX-related sales represented 38% of annual export turnover on average (median: 12.8%). Moreover, nearly three-quarters of reported sales occurred outside the respondents' home country.

Together, these results confirm that WOMEX functions primarily as a platform for internationalisation, in line with its own objectives.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT AND SUBSIDIES

The financial returns of WOMEX participation show a highly uneven distribution. The average declared return on investment (ROI), including subsidies, was **5.59**. However, the median was only 0.8, meaning that most respondents did not cover their costs. The strong average is therefore driven by a few exceptional performers whose results mask a more challenging reality for the majority.

The analysis of subsidies illustrates this asymmetry further. **On average, every euro of subsidy invested in WOMEX generated €16.50 in sales. Yet the median return was only €5.60**, indicating that while a minority of beneficiaries achieved spectacular results, the typical return was far more modest. Public investment therefore appears globally profitable, but its distribution raises questions.

Should subsidies focus on maximizing impact by targeting high-potential beneficiaries, or on reducing disparities by supporting more fragile structures?

5,59
average reported ROI

5,60€
median return on grants
invested in
WOMEX 2024

6 000€

median sales for
participants with a
showcase

1 750€

median sales for
participants without a
showcase

BUT

0,8
median ROI of participants
with showcase

1,5
median ROI of participants
without showcase

THE ROLE OF SHOWCASES

Showcases emerge as a powerful but risky lever of commercial performance. **Respondents with a showcase generated on average twice as many sales as those without. In median terms, showcase participants reported €6,000 in sales, compared with only €1,750 for non-showcase participants.**

Showcases thus clearly boost visibility and attract programmers and buyers more directly.

However, the ROI picture complicates this narrative. For showcase participants, **the median ROI was 0.8**, meaning that most did not recover their costs in the short term. High fixed expenses for venue, technical production, and promotion raise the investment threshold, which explains the lower profitability. While a few showcases achieved spectacular returns that raised the average ROI to 2.56, most fell below breakeven.

By contrast, **non-showcase participants achieved a median ROI of 1.5**, indicating more consistent short-term profitability. However, their qualitative gains—networking, reputation, long-term positioning—were more limited. Overall, the showcase effect creates a dual reality: it amplifies sales potential but increases financial risk. For most, the immediate ROI is negative, but for a minority it can be transformative.

THE ROLE OF TURNOVER AND EXPORT RATIO

The impact of WOMEX varies sharply depending on organizational size and export orientation.

Larger structures (with annual turnover above €150,000) achieved a median of €10,000 in sales, with an average of €23,939. These results reflect a “solid base” of outcomes, supplemented by a few exceptional wins. In contrast, smaller structures (with turnover below €150,000) achieved no sales in most cases (median: €0). A small minority did record some sales, raising the average to €2,000.

This striking disparity—10 times higher on the median and 11 times on the average—shows that WOMEX acts more as an accelerator for already established organizations than as an immediate springboard for smaller ones. Larger structures are better positioned to monetize WOMEX thanks to their existing catalogues, networks, and teams. Smaller structures, however, rather participate in the form of a long-term investment in visibility and integration into the international market.

Export orientation also shapes outcomes. Organizations with less than 50% of turnover from exports achieved median sales of €6,000, nearly 24 times more than the €250 median of those already heavily export-oriented.

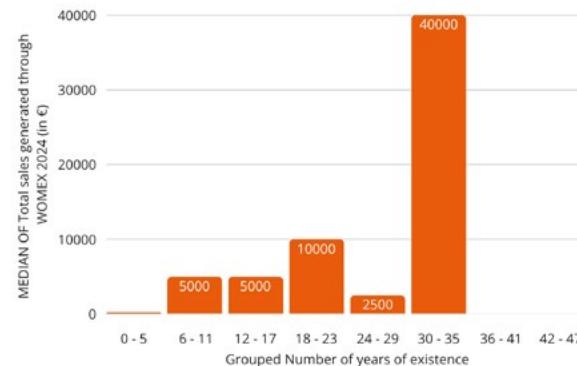
WOMEX therefore seems particularly useful as a gateway for organisations that are usually focused on their domestic market, while its effectiveness is less for those already established in foreign markets.

PROFESSIONAL GROUPS, SENIORITY, AND EXPERIENCE

Differences across professional roles highlight WOMEX’s function as a live music marketplace. **Concert promoters reported the highest sales (median €10,000), followed by managers (€7,000) and bookers (€5,000).** In contrast, **artists and labels reported no direct sales.** For these groups, WOMEX seems to provide value primarily through indirect benefits such as visibility, networking, and partnerships, rather than immediate revenue.

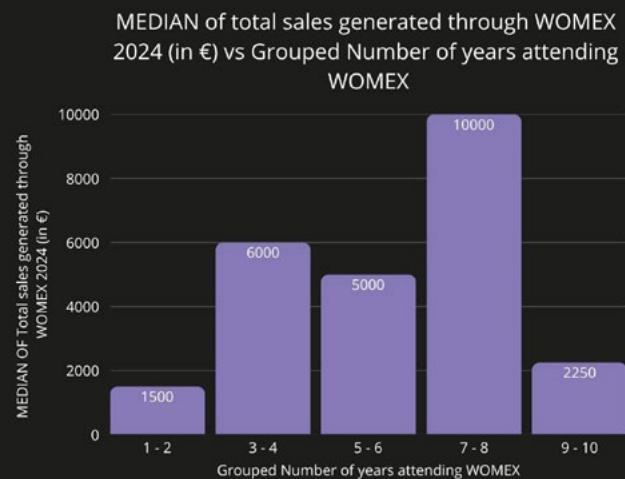
Organizational seniority also plays a role. Very young structures (0–5 years) reported negligible outcomes (median €250), likely due to limited networks and preparation. More established organizations (6–23 years) achieved medians between €5,000 and €10,000, indicating that experience and stability help maximize benefits. A striking peak appeared among organizations aged 30–35 years, with a median of €40,000—likely reflecting a few highly experienced actors with strong catalogues and reputations. However, among the oldest organizations (36–47 years), results declined again, with a median of €0, suggesting diminished commercial reliance on WOMEX.

MEDIAN of total sales generated through WOMEX 2024 (in €) vs Grouped Number of years of existence



TARGET MARKETS

A similar pattern emerged regarding WOMEX participation history. Newcomers ((having participated in WOMEX 1–2 times in the last ten years) reported low sales (median €1,500). After 3–4 participations, results rose sharply (median €6,000) and plateaued at €5,000–€6,000 for regular attendees. The best results came at 7–8 participations (median €10,000), before dropping again for 9–10 participations (median €2,250). This “experience effect” suggests that learning how to navigate WOMEX is crucial, but that its commercial returns decline for long-term veterans who may use the event more for networking than direct sales.



Market orientation strongly influenced results. Organizations targeting **Western Europe** achieved the highest median sales (€6,000), followed by those oriented toward **North America** (€5,000) and **Eastern Europe** (€4,000). In contrast, organizations focused on **Latin America** and **Sub-Saharan Africa** reported no sales. WOMEX therefore appears most effective for European markets, which is consistent with its location and participant base. More distant markets such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia yielded little immediate economic return, likely due to lower buyer representation or longer deal cycles.

€6,000 €5,000 €4,000

median sales of structures targeting Western Europe

median sales of structures targeting North America

median sales of structures targeting Eastern Europe

PERCEPTIONS

Participants' perceptions of WOMEX reflect the mixed quantitative outcomes. The average perceived ROI was 2.71 out of 5, indicating a moderate level of satisfaction. This aligns with the reality of low median ROI but occasional high outliers. Similarly, the perceived impact on organizational growth averaged 2.67 out of 5, with 75% of respondents reporting no significant effect—consistent with the limited short-term returns for smaller organizations.

The exhibition space was rated at 2.5 out of 5, suggesting modest usefulness, whereas networking was valued much more highly (3.75 out of 5). This highlights WOMEX's enduring strength as a networking platform, even when direct sales are limited. Finally, the perceived contribution to international development averaged 3.1 out of 5, confirming that WOMEX plays a role in opening international opportunities, though its impact varies depending on the maturity and profile of the organization.

QUALITATIVE OUTCOMES

The qualitative analysis reinforced these findings. Among the positive outcomes, many respondents cited concrete booking results—such as confirmed dates, tours, and festivals—particularly within Europe. Others emphasized the importance of networking, even in the absence of immediate deals, and mentioned emerging collaborations in Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. Several respondents noted that regular participation created cumulative benefits over time.

Challenges were also widely reported. Many felt WOMEX 2024 was less effective than previous editions, with fewer buyers and reduced diversity. Rising participation costs were a significant burden, especially for organizations from the Global South. Respondents also expressed frustration with structural issues such as commercial saturation and difficulty standing out, while visa barriers created additional obstacles for some non-European participants.

In terms of suggestions, participants called for stronger financial support, better structuring of professional meetings (e.g., speed meetings and targeted sessions), and greater collective visibility through national pavilions. They also recommended improved preparation in advance, including training and information on available support, as well as stronger on-site guidance to maximize outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of WOMEX's impact on participating organizations reveals a mixed picture. Economically speaking, while some players reap significant benefits—sometimes decisive for their export development—the majority are unable to immediately recoup their investments. The gaps between averages and medians, as well as the concentration of benefits among a minority of participants, show that the fair acts more as an **accelerator for already established** organizations than as a direct springboard for smaller ones.

For the latter, the benefits are more intangible: **visibility, networking, symbolic legitimization, learning.** WOMEX thus appears less as a guarantee of immediate sales than as a necessary step in entering international circuits. The central role of networking, widely recognized by respondents, confirms this long-term dimension.

With regard to showcases, the study highlights a dual logic: while they are a powerful lever for visibility and potential sales, they also involve a **high financial risk**, with a return on investment that is often negative in the short term. They are therefore more of a **long-term strategic gamble** than an immediate opportunity.

Finally, the varying effectiveness depending on profiles (size of organizations, seniority, export orientation, professional role) and target markets highlights the importance of thinking of WOMEX not as a homogeneous tool, but as a **differentiated mechanism**, whose benefits vary according to trajectories and strategies.

These results open up several avenues:

- For **participants**, the importance of advance preparation and long-term commitment in order to maximize the benefits.
- For **organizers**, the need to increase the diversity of buyers, broaden the geographical scope, and further structure opportunities for targeted meetings.
- For **public funders**, the challenge of better coordinating support: should priority be given to the "locomotives" capable of generating high returns, or should the most fragile be supported in order to reduce disparities?

Ultimately, WOMEX embodies the tensions inherent in showcase festivals and the music and cultural sector in general: between the promise of internationalization and unequal access to benefits, between market logic and cultural mission.

Rather than a single performance venue, it appears to be a strategic platform, whose effects are long-lasting and primarily affect a minority of players. In this sense, the showcase festival market can be described as a concentrated-return visibility economy, where the majority of players invest in recognition and future opportunities, while only a minority convert this exposure into tangible economic benefits.

THE ASSOCIATION AND ITS PARTNERS

ZONE FRANCHE - THE WORLD MUSIC NETWORK

Zone Franche is an international network bringing together more than 240 organisations (festivals, venues, bookers, labels, artists, media, professional markets, etc.). Present in France and in nearly twenty countries, its members share and defend the values set out in its World Music Charter: the promotion of cultural diversity and intangible cultural heritage, the free mobility of artists, international cooperation, support for artistic creation and the emergence of new artists, cultural rights, etc.

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