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Tech Has No Space for Breastfeeding Moms

Women have been asking for lactation rooms at the Consumer Electronics Show for years. Event organizers directed me to the public bathroom.

I'm sitting in a Las Vegas hotel room, attached to a pink chug-chugging machine the size of a loaf of bread, sobbing. How did I get here?

Like 21.7 million women in the U.S., I returned to the workforce very soon after giving birth. In fact, nearly 1 in 4 new mothers surveyed in 2012 by the Department of Health and Human Services' Maternal and Child Health Bureau were back at work within just two weeks of having a baby, according to In These Times. As is also common, I occasionally need to travel for work. Most recently, that meant CES.

CES, the International Consumer Electronics Show, is the world's largest annual trade show, and as a tech writer, it's a required pilgrimage for me every January. If you've never been, it's massive: 2.2 million net square feet of exhibit space, with over 173,000 attendees. The show encompasses not only the Las Vegas Convention Center (LVCC), but 10 additional hotels along the strip. Going from one end of the show to the other is a two-mile trek, and walking more than five miles a day is the norm. It's a long week, but after a few years, you get the hang of it.

But this year was different. Over the summer, I'd had a baby, and I was determined to exclusively breastfeed him. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that



mothers, whenever possible, breastfeed their babies exclusively for the first six months of life. And while not every woman is able, I desperately wanted to try to make that happen.

Based on experience with CES, I knew that I'd need to pump on the show floors.

Going back to my hotel room wouldn't be a quick trip, if even possible. Often, lines for a cab are 30 minutes to an hour during CES, and with the crowds, even the Las Vegas monorail has a 15- to 20-minute wait.

In light of all this, I planned ahead. In September, I phoned CES customer service to inquire about their lactation room services. While the representative on the line was very polite, the call did not go as I'd hoped. At first the rep seemed confused. Then she told me that "CES [didn't] have any facilities or policies regarding pumping of which [she was] aware." Instead, she helpfully suggested I contact the convention center directly; perhaps they would have a room for their staff I could access.

So I called the Las Vegas Convention Center. The (also very nice) rep for the venue informed me that I should "contact the exhibitor." When I told her that the exhibitor recommend I call her, she replied, "Oh. Well, I know it's not ideal, but there's always the bathrooms..."

Now is when I explain to you why the bathroom is precisely the wrong place to pump breast milk. First of all, breast milk is food. Imagine someone told you that the lunch you ate at a restaurant was prepared in a public toilet stall. You'd freak out and call the health department, right? Of course you would, because bathrooms are not made for the creation of food. Pumping requires the same level of hygienic standards as any other meal prep. Hands must be clean, surfaces must be washed and sanitized. None of this is possible in a bathroom stall.

You can understand, then, why this answer was astonishing to me. A convention like CES has such massive attendance, *surely* some women must have participated while pumping.

There are a lot of new moms in the workforce. According to the CDC, approximately 3.1 million women annually use breast pumps. Heck, even Comic-Con has lactation rooms for attendees, and most people aren't going to Comic-Con for work purposes. This couldn't actually CES's policy, could it? Just to be sure, I tweeted @intCES to double check.

What that got me was invite-only access to a single pump room in the South Hall of the LVCC, upstairs next to the pressroom. The women who staffed that room, especially Phylliscity, the pressroom manager, were gracious, helpful, and welcoming.

Although the room was bare bones, it had all the requirements: a chair, outlets, a table,

and a mini-fridge. But it was one room, single-occupant-sized, in, as I mentioned earlier, two miles of sprawl. So while it solved my needs for the one day I was covering that location, the rest of the week I was on my own.

The rest of the week was challenging at best, and at worst, painful and miserable. On the day I covered the high-end audio suites located in the Venetian, despite carrying my pump with me all day, I couldn't find an adequate place to express milk for my baby. There were so many people I wanted to see and products that I needed to cover for my job, so I put off pumping. That was a mistake.

By noon, my breasts were angry, red, and swollen. At this stage, for me anyway, the skin on my chest feels as though it's sunburned from the inside: fabric, pressure, even a casual bump is painful. Additionally, my breasts get heavy, so they pull on my back and make my neck ache, and occasionally the muscles spasm.

But I wanted to get to every exhibit, so I continued to hold off. By 2 p.m., I'd developed a gnarly headache and was nauseous. I considered going to just a few more meetings, but my hands had started to shake. I realized I needed to get back to my room, and it was still a 20-minute walk to the hotel.

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When I finally got to my hotel room, I was so engorged that attaching to the pump hurt. My breasts were hot to the touch like a fever, and, possibly because I was so stressed out about not getting everything I wanted completed for my job; it took forever to get

the milk going.

For those not in the know, getting milk out of a woman's breasts isn't just automatic. It's partly physical, yes, but it's also psychological. You have to relax, and your brain has to signal to your breasts that it's time to feed a baby. This action, called the "letdown," is like a slow release valve on the milk supply, and it's why some women leak milk when they hear a baby cry.

Different women have different ways of making this happen: some look at pictures of their baby, some watch videos, some smell an article of clothing their baby wore. Whatever the method, it's not unlike telling a person to sneeze on command. With enough stimulus, you can eventually sneeze, but it's not automatic.

And that day, no matter what I tried, I couldn't get my breasts to empty. My armpits ached, and I started to worry: was I going to develop mastitis (an infection of the breasts)? I'd read stories of women who lost their milk supply, and even needed surgery due to the condition. All of this because I wanted to do excellent work for my job, which I love, while feeding my baby, whom I also love.

At that moment, I felt as though I was underperforming in both. Here I was in a hotel room, not on the show floor where I needed to be, spending over an hour attempting to get my milk going so I didn't end up hurting my body, and yet feeling as though I was failing my baby. I started sobbing.

And as I sobbed, I got angry. When I first placed that call to CES customer service, I naively assumed that a new mom attending CES was unusual. But as I walked around the show floor lugging my pump, women came out of the woodwork, sharing their stories with me. As I came to find out, there has been a need for lactation services at the convention for a long time. These women, who worked in public relations, as vendors, as press, spilled their collective guts.

S, a public relations expert who pumped through two CES's, said, "My daughter was barely three months old; I had just come back from maternity leave a few weeks before the show. Faced with the lack of options as to where to pump during the day made things difficult. As the day went on, I had to go back to my hotel room. I hated to take so much time during the day but I was so uncomfortable and knew that I needed to be in the most private comfortable setting I could allow myself. I couldn't let down [into] the pump. I was in agony but didn't have the time to waste.

Sadly, I let this dismal experience affect my decision of when to stop breastfeeding my daughter; I stopped two months shy of my goal, selfishly, so I didn't have to endure the challenges I faced in my first trip."

Molly Dickens of Bloom, a company that makes smart contraction trackers and exhibited at CES, wrote on Medium, "I decide to wander the floors of The Venetian to find a tad more privacy. I stumble upon a 'family' bathroom. Luckily there is an outlet. But I only have access to it if I sit on the floor next to a drippy soap dispenser. I have 20 glorious minutes to ponder the mystery of why a toilet seat would be left up in a bathroom with a urinal."

And C, a 34-year-old engineer who endured clogged ducts while on the road for work, told me, "Learning how to pump on the go and deal with breast issues at the same time has been an absolutely miserable experience. What are you supposed to say to your colleagues about why you need to disappear again? 'Pardon my aching boob. It's clogged again.'"

What amazed me most is that every one of these women, including me, initially saw this struggle as *their* failing, rather than an institutional one. We'd all been quietly enduring, questioning, and judging ourselves because we feared that we might look less focused at work, might be seen as less of a mother, or simply assumed that this was the cross we had to bear in exchange for "having it all."

As evidence: the very fact that some of the same women who shared their stories openly in person also requested that I not use their names for this article in fear of backlash. There is literally an article on Care.com called [How to Pump at Work Without Losing](#).

Your Job.

And despite the law passed as part of the Affordable Care Act that requires businesses with over 50 employees to have lactation rooms, state laws on breastfeeding are highly inconsistent. It's a stark reminder that we, as a workforce, haven't come a long way just yet.

Fortunately, I'm not the only one concerned with this issue. I corresponded with Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) who, last May, introduced the Friendly Airports for Mothers Act that would require commercial airports to provide private lactation rooms for breastfeeding mothers in every terminal. The bill has 61 bipartisan co-sponsors and is working its way through committee.

"Moms shouldn't have to worry about finding a place to breastfeed while they're traveling, they already have enough to worry about. Unlike other public spaces, travelers have little control over the amount of time spent in airports," Duckworth told me. "It's not uncommon for moms to be directed to a bathroom to breastfeed their child. We would never ask our fellow travelers to eat their meals in bathrooms stalls, yet we ask new mothers to feed their children while sitting on a toilet seat."

"The FAM Act stands up for traveling mothers throughout this country and, since I introduced this legislation, mothers from across the country have been sharing their stories with me about why we need to pass this into law. The value of breastfeeding cannot be overstated: the health benefits can last a lifetime for both mother and child. I am encouraged by the response the FAM is receiving and hope to work together with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to enact this legislation."

In many ways, working conventions is a lot like being in an airport. You're stuck in a large building and are beholden to whatever facilities that building provides. There are often security hoops to jump through should you want to exit and re-enter. And getting back to your hotel is just about as convenient at a convention as driving home from the airport is in many cities. When you're stuck in a convention center as a breastfeeding mom, you truly feel trapped. Trapped between your commitment to your job and your (and your baby's) physical needs.

Look, I can't offer solutions to the larger problems at play here: sexism; a society that espouses family values and yet doesn't offer any maternity leave; economic policy that largely requires both parents to work, and yet offers no widespread childcare solutions; a business culture that sees the woman who takes time from the workforce to be with her child as less than dedicated to her job, and yet when she's career-minded she's an unfocused "working mom."

Really, it's all too much. I'm just a tech writer, after all.

But I do have some solutions for how we can support moms who breastfeed, and who

need spaces to do it while working away from home base. I do have a solution to the CES problem.

Here's my proposal: mobile lactation pods. For many places, there are a fixed number of rooms in a structure. If everything is already in use, it's tough to find a place to put a pump room or nursing suite. Often, that's the biggest hurdle to jump for businesses, and for CTA, who rents out the show floor to exhibitors, I can imagine it's an economic issue. But if you can fit a cubicle in the space, you can roll in a small-wheeled lactation room.

I got in touch with the folks at [Mamava](#), who make lactation pods that companies can purchase for their employees or clients to utilize. The pods are economical in space, private, and, if desired, can be listed on a map so women can use the Mamava app to locate one nearby. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends [six lactation rooms for every 1,000 employees in a company](#).

At large convention centers and stadiums, Mamava recommends a minimum of six units, or as they told me, "Most certainly there should be lactation rooms at every location." With a pod, conventions can put the lactation suites adjacent to the show floor, rather than requiring attendees to trek to far-flung locales in a venue.

Even more compellingly, Mamava tells me they "have a placement program where we partner with facilities, sell media on the pods, and after we make up our capex on the pod, shipping, and install, [we] share in ongoing revenue from media sales on the pod. In this scenario facilities/show producers can recoup any up front cost or costs for maintenance (cleaning) very quickly." Translation: with ad sales, this could mean a net-zero cost for conventions like CES.

Consumer technology, like many aspects of business, is largely viewed as a male-dominated world, despite the fact that, according to a [2012 study done by the Consumer Electronics Association themselves](#), women initiated or are involved in 61 percent of all technology purchases. Anyone who has attended CES for a long time has seen the changes. The segment of tech showcased at CES that appeals to moms' needs as well as baby and family needs has been steadily growing. Advanced baby monitors, smart pacifiers, even geo-tracking teddy bears—moms and babies are big business.

In my hotel overlooking the Vegas strip, that's what made my sobbing turn to anger, and finally turn to conviction. Mothers trying to balance their jobs and babies are nothing new at CES, or any convention or workplace for that matter. *Talking about it* is. While I was grateful to have access to that little lactation room in the LVCC, its existence proved to me that the CTA knew there was a need for such services; they just hadn't thought to provide them to the attendees. Perhaps it's because not enough moms have asked.

Change is possible: after hearing Congresswoman Duckworth's testimony about her legislation and the needs of new mothers, the Chicago City Council voted to recommend lactation rooms be placed in every terminal at both major Chicago airports.

So now *I'm* asking. CES, be an example for other conventions, the way that Chicago is for other airports. Recognize that women in tech can also be mothers in tech (who, by the way, help raise tech consumers). Help us stay on the show floor longer, and do our jobs to their fullest. Provide lactating women the same level of assistance you'd give to any other medical need. Show the global community that it is in everyone's interest to be mom friendly.

And while you're at it, sell some ad space. It is a convention, after all.