

POSITIVE TRENDS, HOT PRODUCTS, MINOR QUIBBLES AND OTHER NOTES FROM GEAR EXPO 97

Notes from Detroit . . . Overall, Gear Expo 97, the AGMA biennial trade show, was a success. While attendance may not have been what some people had hoped for, the *quality* of the attendees was high. Serious buyers came and brought their checkbooks.

Foreign attendance was up. We saw a lot more customers from Australia, South America, Mexico and Europe. Their positive reactions suggest that they will return home to spread the word about Gear Expo, which should net even more overseas visitors in 1999.

We also sensed a bigger number of visitors from the automotive and heavy industry sectors, implying that the "big guys" too seem to be developing an awareness of the advantages of this trade show as an opportunity to comparison shop and to get to know more about their potential suppliers—their CEOs, sales people, technical staff—and to nurture these relationships all in one place.

This growing awareness of the positive aspects of the Gear Expo experience is based, I think, on the fact that the Expo is growing up. The word is getting out that this is a worthwhile stop to make.

New products and technology helped to generate excitement at the Gear Expo. Both Gleason and Oerlikon demonstrated machines offering dry carbide face hobbing of spiral bevel gears. The new machines, first introduced at EMO, claim an up to 60% reduction in manufacturing time from their previously available machines. These machines are not only fast and eliminate the need for coolant, but leave the parts cool enough to handle as soon as the cycle is complete. We'll be looking for more of this technology in the future.

Mitsubishi introduced its new ST25CNC gear shaper, which has no helical guides. Instead, reciprocating and oscillating motion are synchronously controlled by the CNC. This seems like a great innovation for prototypes and short runs.

M & M Precision exhibited a new checker which used a laser rather than a probe to analyze parts. Right now, the technology is being applied to splines or cams, but it also may provide a "sneak preview" of the future.

The problems associated with sharpening carbides and recoating tools after every sharpening and the trend toward manufacturers narrowing their focus on their core competencies may have been addressed by Pfauter Maag Cutting Tools. The company has introduced a service to regularly pick up, sharpen, recoat, inventory and deliver cutting tools right to its customers' factories. Right now this service is limited to the Midwest, but it could be the beginning of a larger trend.

Amid all this innovation—four important developments announced at one show is not a bad record—I did notice one strange phenomenon: Two of the leading providers of hobbing machines, Gleason and Pfauter, didn't exhibit any of their hob-

bers, while two companies we don't associate with these machines, National Broach and Reishauer, did. Is this the start of another trend, or just one of those anomalies that make one go, "H-m-m-m"?

On a personal note, I was pleased by the very positive response to our demonstrations of *powertransmission.com*TM, our electronic buyers guide for the power transmission industry (you, our readers), and *The Gear Industry Home Page*TM, which provides information about machinery and services for the gear manufacturing industry. There is a growing awareness of how important it is to have a site on the Internet and of the usefulness of an electronic buyers guide like ours to help direct users to a company's own Web site. Our six-months-free offer had a lot of takers. Many companies at the show expressed a desire to create their own Web sites, but were afraid they'd never be found and were visibly enthusiastic that our buyers guide concept solved that problem. We were also pleased to note the number of show visitors who told us they were regular users of our sites. Both are becoming important resource tools for gear and power transmission engineers.

The feel-good mood of the show extended beyond the walls of Cobo Hall. Even the much-maligned city of Detroit seems to be turning a corner. The city has a long way to go, but the downtown area seems as though it will be undergoing a rebirth in the coming years.

Of course, at least some of the success of the show has to be laid at the doorstep of our strong economy. A rising tide raises all boats, and people are in a mood to buy right now. Companies need the capacity now; they need to make the investments now; they feel confident about upgrading their machinery and systems now. Furthermore, for once the perennial mess in Washington is working to the advantage of business and the economy. Both parties are so busy playing "gotcha" politics that they have left the economy alone to work with minimal interference—a fate we can all enjoy and take advantage of. Those things all go toward contributing to the "era of good feeling" that seemed to permeate the show.

The one nagging question that continues to be raised about the Gear Expo is whether or not the expense and effort of exhibiting is worth it. This show attracted just 4000+ people (including 1250 exhibitors and staff). And that's in good times.



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PUBLISHER'S PAGE

Behind the smiles and happy talk about the show is the nagging feeling on the part of some major exhibitors that Gear Expo still costs way too much in terms of money, time and effort compared to the number of attendees and the amount of productive exhibit time. One exhibitor told me that he calculated the price of each lead he generated at the show at \$1000!

AGMA needs to change its focus to attracting more visitors, not just more exhibitors. The show's success cannot be judged just by the number of booths sold. Key to Gear Expo's continuing success is for exhibitors to have a commercially successful show—one with lots of customers. Better, more aggressive publicity and year-round-promotion, even small things like clear, identifiable signage outside the show hall (one of the major exhibitors commented that he wasn't sure that the taxi brought him to the right place since the only sign on the outside of the building was for another show!), all can make for a better show.

AGMA also needs to look at the demographics of both its visitors and exhibitors. True, the Detroit location attracted an increasing number of automotive and heavy industry people, but visitors from small and medium-sized shops are critical to a show's success. More work needs to be done to attract them to the show. Perhaps Detroit's location at the edge, rather than in the heart of "gear country," works against attracting enough of these visitors.

That same fact may also cast a shadow on the possibilities for Nashville in '99. Like Detroit, Nashville is on the edge, rather than in the center of "gear country," and its location could work against it. If the economy is strong, '99 in Nashville will probably be another success; however, a weakening economy could mean a different scenario. A grimmer business picture just might provide the excuse people need not to travel the extra distance and for the exhibitors to decide to cut back on the "iron" they bring.

Granted, Gear Expo attendance numbers have shown small, incremental growth over the years, so perhaps these can be seen as minor quibbles. But is the increase enough? Are the additional visitors the kind of customers the exhibitors are looking for? Will exhibitors be willing to hang in long enough to allow customer attendance to grow at less than 10% every two years, (and this is in good times)? Are there other ways to get the numbers higher or the costs lower, and finally, will the increasingly popular Gear Pavilion at IMTS prove to be more cost effective for exhibitors—especially when the economy cools?

The planners at AGMA deserve full marks for growing the show as well as they have over the last decade, but they also cannot rest on their laurels. Gear Expo is a good idea that still needs work to ensure its long term success.

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