

IMTS

North America's Show of Shows

Jack McGuinn, Senior Editor



Accounts vary, but the trade show—or fair, exposition, exhibition—whatever you call it—has been around since approximately 600 B.C. The Old Testament book of Ezekiel contains many references to merchants trading, “in a multitude, riches with silver, iron, tin and lead (*Source: “History of Trade Shows & Exhibitions,” by Karan Singh, articleinspector.com*).” Since the 1960s, the article continues, trade shows and exhibitions have been “extensively used as a prominent part of marketing strategy. Larger amounts are spent each year on trade exhibitions than on magazine, radio and outdoor advertising.”

Some 2,600 years later, Ezekiel would be hard-pressed to recognize or understand what goes on at today's shows. Trade shows—and how they are presented—continue to evolve: new technologies in graphics, sound and lighting, booth construction and much more continue to dazzle. And yet one thing has remained constant since those B.C. days—i.e., capturing the hearts and minds of new and existing customers—and their wallets.

We talked with a number of major companies in the midst of their planning and strategizing for IMTS 2012,

with the thought of determining just how much things have in fact changed for exhibitors regarding the trade show experience.

Take social media, for example. How influential is today's texting and tweeting mania on trade show planning and execution? Are customers clamoring for it, as some media accounts report?

“Social media will not play a significant role in our 2012 IMTS exhibition,” says Al Finegan, Gleason Corp.'s director of marketing. “We are continuing to explore the use of social media in our marketing and promotion, but beyond our YouTube channel, the direction is not clear. And no, our customers are not clamoring for it.”

“Social media ‘apps’ are becoming more important each year and we believe will be a significant outlet along with web, print and direct mail,” Bill Miller, vice-president of sales at Kapp Technologies, allows.

And at Sandvik Coromant U.S., “Social media has been a part of (our) marketing and communications tools for the last several years,” says Rick Hern, Sandvik project manager. “We are constantly releasing valuable content like application tips, events, new product news and app releases through

our social media channels. At IMTS this year, we will continue to provide our followers with the latest IMTS news.”

“We have not received a groundswell of requests from customers to communicate via social media and as such we are taking a wait and see approach before making any major commitments in that regard,” says Sunnen's Bob Davis, global communications manager. “However, we do have a YouTube channel so customers can view videos of our honing machines in operation and other informational videos we produce.”

As for IMTS in particular—the greatest (manufacturing) show on earth?

Looking at it in a solely U.S.-based context, Gleason's Finegan states that “I assume this is intended to get at the question of IMTS *or* Gear Expo. To say that one is more important than the other is like comparing apples to oranges. IMTS is the largest manufacturing technology show in the western hemisphere, and even though the gear world is only a small part of manufacturing technology, our customers expect the market leader to be there with a significant presence.

"Gear Expo is of course very small but highly focused on gear manufacturing. In addition, it has the unusual dynamic of the manufacturing technology suppliers like Gleason exhibiting alongside some of our customers. Both shows are very important to the market and to Gleason."

"IMTS is the most significant show in North America for its size, quality of attendees and the opportunity to discover new customers and applications," says Miller.

"IMTS is where customers, technology and industry partners merge on a bi-annual basis," says Hern. "As an industry leader, Sandvik Coromant recognizes that IMTS is the best-acknowledged manufacturing event in North America and continues to bring innovation and cutting tool solutions to customers attending the show."

"By any standard, IMTS is the most important overall manufacturing show in North America, whether it is judged by size, number of exhibitors, number of attendees, media coverage or newsworthiness," Davis says. "Gear manufacturing is not done in a vacuum, so a broad-based show like IMTS is a very important event for gear manufacturers as well. However, there is still an important place for smaller events such as Gear Expo, which highlight the technology, equipment and issues of concern to gear manufacturers and their suppliers."

A show of such accepted significance is obviously no small matter in terms of cost, preparation and strategic goals. What does it take to make exhibiting at IMTS a success?

"Any show, regardless of size and location, involves strategic planning," Finegan says. "We carefully develop our global show plan on an annual basis, with strategy in mind. What are the right processes and products for the particular market? What are our competitors likely to exhibit? What message are we trying to impart to the audience at this show in this market at this time? And so on."

"A significant expense such as IMTS certainly requires extensive planning and promotion," Miller says. "The products we choose to display are selected to introduce the latest tech-

nology, and to best fit the anticipated growth markets at that time."

And at Sandvik Coromant, "It is important to us to be able to provide a great learning environment and experience to our customers and industry partners," Hern says. "Throughout the entire year we work on planning and developing the ultimate experience for attendees visiting our booth and the student summit area."

Sunnen's Davis points out that "Much of the strategic planning that

goes into a large show such as IMTS is incremental from previous IMTS shows, so it is not an overwhelming task from year to year to develop our plan of attack. However, the implementation of the plan cuts across nearly all departments in the company to some degree, and for a handful of individuals it consumes nearly all of their time for several months leading up to the show."

So once everything is in place and the show curtain rises, who do exhib-

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iting companies want stationed on the front lines? Which personnel are believed to be irreplaceable in the booth—sales or technical?

“Both sales and technical staff have an important role,” says Finegan. “Sales has the contacts and the deep relationships with customers, but the nature of the technology requires solid technical support at any show. Customers have questions and they expect to receive answers on the show

floor—answers to help their decision-making process.”

Likewise Kapp’s Miller—but for a different reason. “In fact, the most important personnel are management, who make it a priority to be in attendance to personally introduce themselves and to greet customers.”

“Our IMTS staff is a true representation of how Sandvik Coromant works together in order to provide customers with the right answers,” says Hern. “We provide our staff with the neces-

sary knowledge, training and support to be able to provide answers to attendees when needed.”

And for Sunnen, “It is very important to have the right mix of sales staff and technical staff working in the booth at an important show such as IMTS,” Davis says. “The mix varies from company to company, but for the companies who are on the cutting edge of technology in their individual niche markets, such as Sunnen with the honing equipment business, the mix must include more technical personnel than for companies who are selling products with older or more generally accepted technology. We normally have one technical person for every 3 or 4 sales people working in the booth at any given time.”

But at the end of the day—six days, to be precise—was it all worth it? And just how does a company determine that?

“We have a number of metrics for our shows that involve visitors, leads, sales and other things,” says Finegan. “I expect most exhibitors have similar metrics. We also perform a detailed internal survey of all staff and others who participated in the planning and execution of the show. We have a pretty good idea of our success by the end of the show—but also a strong post-mortem process to back it up.”

“Statistics can be compared shortly after a show,” Miller says, “but in most cases success of a specific show can only be quantified beyond six months.”

Sandvik’s Hern says that “Success at IMTS is measured in several ways—the direct sales lead for a specific product interest, the overall attendance at the show, and the support seen with the machine tool builders.”

“We generally know when we walk out of the show whether the show was good, bad or somewhere in between,” Davis says. “By ranking the trade show leads on a percentage chance of turning into a sale we can come up with a rough idea of the actual short-term value of the show. However, it often takes months or even years for some show leads to turn into sales, so it is very difficult to get an exact dollar amount of the value of a show.”

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