

Opinion Research And The Summer NAMM Show

Using the NAMM Show as a vehicle to gauge larger industry sentiments, we've taken to staging a post-show poll of a cross section of exhibitors and retailers. (The results begin on p. 68 of this issue.) Sifting through hundreds of questionnaires and email responses, the first thing that becomes obvious is that the number of opinions about the show very probably exceeded NAMM's official attendance figure of 17,000. This seeming impossibility is due to the fact that a number of our poll respondents are sufficiently nimble mentally that they have no trouble holding multiple opinions simultaneously. One respondent opined that any summer show in the Southwest was unequivocally "doomed to failure" because people wouldn't tolerate the sweltering climate, but offered the following helpful suggestion: "Have the show in Dallas next year." (The questionnaire came in anonymously, otherwise we would have forwarded a Rand McNally atlas.)

Despite the welter of often conflicting opinion about the usefulness of a summer show, the merits of Austin as a venue, and the wisdom of moving from Nashville two years ago, a few clear trends emerge from our polling. First and foremost, there is strong, although not unanimous, support for a second show in the summer. Corporate heft pretty consistently determines which side of the issue a company will take. Those exhibitors in favor of a summer event tend to be smaller businesses that either rely on independent reps or telemarketing, and don't have the benefit of a large captive sales organization. For them, the show is a powerful, cost-effective means for getting face-to-face with their customers. In addition to yielding sales generating contacts, it also provides them with invaluable market research.

The exhibitors who are lukewarm or against the summer show are almost exclusively larger companies with well established sales and distribution systems. For them, the show is an expensive image-building effort with hard-to-quantify benefits. As one of them commented, "I don't think we generated one dollar of business [in Austin] that we wouldn't have gotten anyway."

Yogi Berra once famously said of a popular New York restaurant, "It's so crowded, no one goes there anymore." That sums up the way a number of retailers feel about the huge winter NAMM show and explains the ongoing appeal



of the summer session. In conversation, half-a-dozen of the largest retailers in the country said they could accomplish more at the summer session than at winter NAMM because they got more "quality time" with their suppliers. This sentiment was echoed by hundreds of other retailers who completed our survey.

Our polling data starts to get a bit murky on the issue of how best to configure future summer shows. From the benefit of hindsight, a large consensus now feels that moving the show from Nashville was not a good idea. However, there wasn't a correspondingly strong mandate to return the show to Music City USA. A majority of those we polled said give the show another try in Austin where it can gain some momentum. Others suggested alternating between Austin and Nashville.

Although our industry is going through a rather tumultuous period of change, two forces continue to drive most business activity. One is the cultivation of personal relationships, and the other is the introduction of new products. Both of these activities are ideally suited for a tradeshow, which why we hope NAMM continues the Summer Show. More than one business sage has suggested that "if you listen to your customers, they'll tell you what you need to do." If the management at NAMM has the patience to sift through thousands of industry opinions, we're confident that they will be able to craft a viable summer trade show format that meets the needs of its membership.

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