

Man Versus Machine

Ever since the dawn of the industrial revolution about 250 years ago, there has been an ongoing and often vigorous debate about the optimal relationship between man (and woman) and machine. At times the argument got a bit too vigorous, like in the 1800s, when unemployed cloth weavers in England, supposedly answering the call of a god named “Lud,” went on a rampage smashing and burning textile plants. The Luddites, as they were called, feared that the production line would displace labor and result in poverty and mass starvation. Today, no one seems quite as exercised as the Luddites, but the man vs. machine debate is still very much with us. Just consider all those guitar ads extolling the uniquely soulful quality of a handmade guitar, versus a lesser product cranked out by a machine. Violin makers, piano companies, horn builders, and just about everyone else also makes the pitch that nothing can replace the touch of a skilled artist.

At the other end of the spectrum, you have the technophiles who argue that in the very near future computer automation will replace us all. Sales, inventory and supply-chain management, design, marketing, you name it, will all be handled seamlessly through the internet by some high-powered processor, while we mere mortals stand by and watch. Ray Kurzweil, the founder of Kurzweil Music Systems and a proponent of artificial intelligence, goes even further in asserting that it’s only a matter of time before the marriage of nano and digital technology yields “artist” machines that will humble the efforts of Beethoven, Shakespeare, and Michelangelo.

“Handmade,” like “home cooking,” is often overrated. Yet technology can also be oversold. Watching thousands crowd the aisles of the Frankfurt Fair last month, it was hard to believe that all this human activity could be replaced anytime soon by a powerful processor and a high-speed T-1 line. There is something about human interaction that is still a critical element in most business dealings. Who is credible? Who seems to understand your problems? Who has the right attitude? These are questions most effectively answered through face-to-face meetings. Which brings us to the Summer NAMM show in Nashville, slated for June 18-20.

Following the economic upheavals of the past 18 months, everyone I know is reassessing every facet of their business—product lines carried, pricing policies,

compensation programs, promotional methods, education, you name it. I have been scanning business equipment catalogs and the internet looking for a software program that helps answer these “life and death” questions to no avail. However, I am confident that anyone who goes to the Summer NAMM show with tough questions will leave with some concrete answers. There will be close to 400 suppliers present. Everyone has a vested interest in seeing retailers thrive and prosper, and they will be offering up practical advice, backed by new products and marketing support.



In a wired age where we are all constantly in touch, there is still a need for face-to-face interaction to grapple with the most challenging issues. That’s why the Frankfurt Musikmesse continues to attract over 100,000 each year, and why Summer NAMM is still so important. Every supplier in the industry is “hungry for business,” which is a polite way of saying that they’re willing to cut prices, offer terms, and do whatever it takes to get the sale. Go to NAMM in Nashville, and there will unquestionably be great deals. More importantly, though, it is a unique source for insights and advice that will help you ride out the economic storm. Machines can do a lot, but until they can dispense wisdom, there’s no substitute for a trade show.

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