

Reevaluating NAMM's Summer Show

Trade shows are, by nature, supposed to be enthusiastic, high-energy affairs where industries converge to present their products in the best possible setting and revel in a few days of fellowship. Unfortunately, at the recently concluded summer NAMM show that vital enthusiasm and energy was sadly lacking. From the exhibitor's standpoint, the show ranged somewhere between "mediocre" and "complete disaster." The fact that retail turnout was sparse indicates that the show did not hold much appeal for dealers, either.

These poor results have prompted a number of exhibitors to petition NAMM to discontinue the summer show (see page 18 of this issue). Before killing an event that has served the industry well for decades, we would urge NAMM to consider altering its format.

The summer show was a disappointment for most manufacturers simply because the dealer traffic was not sufficient to justify the high cost of exhibiting. The shakedown tactics of McCormick Place's Teamsters Union, combined with the high cost of Chicago hotels and restaurants, make the June show a far more expensive proposition than the Anaheim Winter Market. Yet, from the standpoint of drawing dealers, the Anaheim show literally leaves Chicago in the dust. These realities have prompted scores of manufacturers to conclude that the Chicago show, in its present format, is no longer a cost-effective promotional vehicle.

Before going any further, it should be noted that the current woes of the Chicago show have little, if anything, to do with the general health of the music market. While industry-wide sales growth has unquestionably slowed, the business remains fundamentally sound. Worldwide, manufacturers are not overly burdened with excess capacity, interest rates remain within reason, and retailers, on balance, have their expenses and inventories in line. The painful fact that the Chicago show is floundering in good times should prompt all parties to seriously rethink the event's format and purpose.

From our standpoint, the summer show, in order to remain viable, needs increased drawing power and a lower cost structure for exhibitors. Achieving these two goals simultaneously is not so difficult as it might seem. NAMM has only to look

back at how it once staged regional events and observe how other industries configure their shows.

In planning next year's Chicago show, we would suggest that NAMM consider emulating the format of the Audio Engineering Society show, or simply resurrecting its old regional show format. Both the current AES show and the NAMM regional shows of the fifties and sixties were staged in hotels and consisted of modest manufacturer exhibits and a large program of seminars and panel discussions. Annually staged in the East, West, and Midwest, NAMM's former regionals consistently drew healthy attendance and widespread industry praise. Similarly, despite small hotel room exhibits, the AES show consistently draws thousands, including many music dealers.

Time is in short supply at the Winter Market, so NAMM might consider holding education seminars only at the June event. Seminars might include staging panel discussions where top retailers discuss pertinent topics like effective advertising, managing inventory, and successful promotions. Outside experts could also be brought in to enlighten the industry on subjects like effectively utilizing bar coding or how to properly administer employee health benefits. These are just a few of hundreds of possible seminar topics.

Since major new product introductions in June are a thing of the past, there is a good chance that a strong, well directed, educational program would help bring more dealers to a summer show. Furthermore, dealers, and the industry at large, could benefit handsomely from such a program. If show exhibits were curtailed in size and cost by taking the show out of McCormick Place and into a large local hotel, manufacturers would also become more enthusiastic about the event.

After several years of decline, NAMM's summer show is clearly at a turning point. The challenge facing NAMM is to gracefully respond to the demands of the exhibitors and retailers by reconfiguring the show. For the sake of industry unity and progress, we wish them every success in this task.

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