



Ready or Not, Here it Comes



Everyone who's ever been a kid knows the rules of hide-and-seek. When you're "it," you have to cover your eyes and count to twenty (or a hundred, depending on how tough your neighborhood is). When you're done counting, you have to shout, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Ready or not, here I come." You have to shout it. It's in the rules.

Well, it's August, and IMTS is "it." North America's biggest manufacturing event takes place September 13-18, and the big show on the block is almost finished counting. I get the sense that some of you might not feel like going to IMTS. You're probably very busy, and buying machine tools may be the last thing on your mind. But ready or not, IMTS is coming.

Over the past month, I've talked to a lot of people in the gear industry, including gear manufacturers, tooling suppliers and machine tool manufacturers. Each of those groups represents a different part of the economic cycle of the gear industry.

Many gear manufacturers are cautiously upbeat. They're taking orders and hiring employees. A couple of months ago, I spoke with an executive at one of the major manufacturers of industrial gear drives. He told me that they've had the largest order intake in the history of the company. Then just a few days ago, he told me that the orders keep on coming. I've recently spoken with several others, in different parts of the market, who are experiencing similar upticks in business. Most of them aren't ready to celebrate just yet, mostly because they're not certain that

what they're experiencing within their own companies is widespread or sustainable. In the general economy, there are plenty of sectors--housing is one example--that are still dead. But I've heard the same thing from too many different sources for it to be coincidence. From my anecdotal evidence, at least, the demand for gears in the United States appears to be on the rise.

Suppliers of cutting tools, workholding and other consumables are also very busy. They are working very hard to keep up with the increase in demand from gear manufacturers. If gear manufacturers are cutting more teeth, they're using up more hobs, shaper cutters, grinding wheels and so on. When gear demand goes up, the demand for tooling goes up almost immediately.

But the demand for machine tools is another thing. Although machine tool sales are up considerably over last year, not many machine tool manufacturers are celebrating just yet. Their business cycle tends to lag considerably behind the gear manufacturing and tooling sectors of the gear industry.

What that tells me is that although many of you are extremely busy right now, you may not be ready to buy machine tools. You're getting busier, your sales are up, but you aren't yet to the point where you need to add manufacturing capacity or upgrade existing technology.

So I understand if you're a little bit reluctant to go to IMTS. You probably are busy meeting orders and training employees—or retraining those you've hired back. But the show is coming, whether you're ready or not. And

IMTS represents a great opportunity to explore the latest technology. We've previewed much of that technology here in our pre-show issue. Our coverage begins on page 26, and you'll find that many suppliers to the gear industry are promising new machines and new technology at this year's show. We've done our best to highlight some of the most important new equipment, but we didn't have room for it all, so there will be additional booth previews in our September/October show issue. Of course, none of this is any substitute for going to the show yourself, where you will have the opportunity to talk to the people who engineer, build and install the latest technology all around the world.

Even if buying new equipment is the least of your priorities, going to the show will give you a lot of perspective and insight, especially by talking to suppliers, who have been talking to customers in a wide range of industries and from a variety of companies. Those suppliers often have a better idea than you do of what's going on in various parts of various markets.

So I encourage you to make the most of this opportunity. IMTS only comes around once every two years, and you don't get many chances like this to survey the best new technology. Even if you're not quite at the point where you're ready to buy new machinery, you'll at least be able to learn about ways to improve your product quality, increase your productivity and expand your capabilities. Even if you're not a full-time gear manufacturer, make sure you visit the gear pavilion to learn as much as you can about the latest technology. Take the time and go to IMTS.

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