

Letters:

Readers Respond

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Send mail to:

Letters to the Editor, *Gear Technology*

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E-mail: publisher@geartechnology.com

The following letters were written in response to the Publisher's Page editorial, "Is Gear Expo Worth It?" which appeared in the November/December 2005 issue.

Dear Michael:

The question regarding the value, or lack of value, of industrial trade shows is not new. In your January/February issue, the response depended greatly upon whether you were sponsoring the show or attending it. It can also depend upon whether the cost of exhibiting comes out of your bottom line or is subsidized in some form or another by a foreign nation to promote trade.

Attendance at industrial shows has declined over the years. Many companies have limited or restricted attendance altogether, in view of the time and cost associated with attending—and [of the] questionable value.

However, I still believe there is a place for industrial shows, and that attendance is only one factor in evaluating their success. A trade show is the only place where the end-user (buyer) and builder (seller) meet on neutral ground. There is no question that IMTS and EMO are the two most important shows for the manufacturing world. Of the two, EMO is the more complete show. IMTS tends to be a metalcutting show, which has resulted in spin-off shows such as Gear Expo, METALFORM, PMTS, FABTECH, etc. These shows serve niche markets and might well be consolidated into IMTS—and be better off for doing so. On the other hand, the single-product, off-year shows are more personal, less crowded and serve specific segments of manufacturing.

However, I do question if it is practical or cost-effective to run a show for an attendance of some 2,000 actual visitors.

FABTECH 2005, a combined show with SME & AWS, had an attendance of 24,000—the largest number of visitors since 1999. In contrast, METALFORM had 75 press exhibitors in 1999, 41 in 2005 and 23 in 2006, in part due to the outsourcing of stampings, a declining market, and less interest in the U.S. market on the part of foreign press manufacturers. Gear Expo is faced with some of the same economic factors.

Regardless of the size of the show, the value an exhibitor gets out of it is in direct relation to the effort put forth in preparing for it. There is nothing more disconcerting to the president of an exhibiting company than seeing an empty booth with four of his top salespeople talking to each other. And the value attendees get out of a show is in direct proportion to the amount of new technology on the show floor and the quality of the technical sessions.

Looking back at the interval of the NMTBA, five-year shows

were too long. But the two-year cycle of IMTS and the frequency of some of the single-product and regional shows make them more difficult to justify—both in terms of the cost to exhibit and the cost to attend.

The long-term effect of trade shows is difficult to evaluate. I recall receiving a large machine tool order from a young OEM manufacturing engineer. He asked if I had remembered him. I replied no. He said, "You were the only one who took time to talk to me at IMTS when I was a student many years ago." So when we speak about the quality of the visitors, it's not just those with a P.O. in their pocket.

Finally, from the exhibitor's viewpoint, the objective is to get your name out in front of prospective customers, end-users and buyers—and to get qualified inquiries regarding your product. Industrial shows are only one of a number of means of doing so. And as the cost of exhibiting increases, industrial shows become less cost-effective. Sales is a numbers game, and if the attendance numbers continue to drop, the exhibitors will decline in direct proportion, and the show will lose its importance to the segment of the industry it is intended for.

Albert B. Albrecht, Owner
Albrecht Associates

Michael:

Quite frankly, my impression and experience at the show are in contrast to the rather negative one that you described. As an actual attendee, I certainly found much value in being there. My vice president of engineering and I spent a day and a half walking the show, meeting with a long list of current and potential suppliers, learning of and viewing the latest technology, and taking advantage of being able to speak with various company representatives and executives who we may not normally get a chance to talk with. With everything "under one roof" at the Expo, we were able to do this in a very focused and concentrated setting. It makes for a very efficient use of our time.

I can also say that, almost without exception, the exhibitors that I talked to were feeling very good about the Expo, the attendance and most importantly, the level of business or potential business that was being generated. Were there fewer attendees? Were they the real decision makers? If you take Milwaukee Gear as being representative, then the answer would be yes to both questions. We send fewer people today than in prior years because of the tremendous demand on everyone's time. But between myself and Terry, you had the chief technologist and decision maker. I don't think the exhibitors are disappointed in that.

Rick Fullington, President
Milwaukee Gear Co.

(Editor's Note: Rick Fullington became vice chairman of the AGMA executive board in March.)



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Michael,

I am a gearing consultant and supplier of software. I did attend the show this year, but only because I was a presenter at the AGMA Fall Technical Meeting as well. I did not rent booth space for the simple reason that those who attend the show are not my target audience. The target audience should be those people who manufacture the consumer product that uses the gear (for example, a windshield wiper motor manufacturer, or a garage door opener manufacturer).

If the advertising for the show could reach those types of people, then exhibitors would set up their displays to solve problems for their clients in specific products as opposed to just selling hobs to other gear manufacturers. The mailing list would be much larger if you included all consumer product suppliers.

The show is a "Gear Expo," not a "Hob Expo," so the gear manufacturers should be showing off what they can do to help the people who buy gears. Anyone who is in the gear business already knows who to contact for hobs and machinery.

Ernie Reiter, President
Web Gear Services Ltd.

Mr. Goldstein,

I read your editorial about attendance at Gear Expo with some interest. I attended the show, and was also a speaker at an associated technical seminar. I was accompanied by two other company employees as well, so we were about a quarter of a percent of the total non-exhibiting attendees.

We attended as a supplier to the industry. Our main purpose in attending the show is to keep an eye on whatever is going on in the industry. A market-wide expo like this showcases many different sides of the business and helps us get a good impression of the overall status or health of the industry, as well as anything new that may affect our direct business. Also, we do have a number of customers exhibiting, and it gives us a view into how our products are ultimately represented to the market.

In my observation, over the past several years of attending various manufacturing trade shows of this type, the general trend has been for disappointingly low attendance almost across the board, even well after the business levels of several years ago picked up again. I am concerned about a couple of permanent changes in the business infrastructure that could negatively impact the future of trade shows.

First, during the recent business downturn, many companies downsized. Even where the design or engineering functions were not directly affected, the demands on the time of remaining current employees is greater, and fewer people seem to feel they have the luxury of leaving their work for a few days to attend such a function.

Second, among the coming generation of designers and engineers, there may be an expectation that all useful information can be obtained from the Internet, and there is no need to physically visit suppliers, customers, or industry functions to gain information. Traditional networking is not seen as a useful or efficient way to do business.

Finally, because of the economic crunch faced by manufacturing businesses in the United States today, the businesses seem driven far more strongly by a need to reduce up-front costs and product pricing, rather than by a need to improve their products. Their customers, the end users of their products, perhaps influenced strongly by the auto market, are constantly demanding lower pricing, not higher performance or a better mousetrap. Products are less frequently evaluated based on their contribution to operating and production costs, or overall cost effectiveness, but more commonly solely on their initial price, and under competitive bidding at that. This may be a by-product of the survival mode that many manufacturing companies have found themselves in for the past five years or so, but it does little to encourage companies to spend time and money on new developments.

Many of the traditional benefits of attending a trade show—sharing information with peers, making contacts, learning new things, expanding the horizons, and so forth—are difficult to reconcile with the current short-term needs of manufacturing organizations. Perhaps trade show organizers could regain some of their traditional attendance by focusing on presenting trade shows as venues for cost reductions or improved competitiveness.

Ed Tarney, Chief Product Metallurgist
Crucible Service Center

The following letter was written in response to the Addendum column, "Wicked Gears," which appeared in the January/February 2006 issue.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am really not a big fan of musicals, so it is rather unlikely that I will visit a performance—and probably it has not been shown yet in Switzerland or other parts of Europe.

I myself prefer more complex symphonic concerts or operas.

Have you seen the last Salzburg Festival production of Turandot conducted by Gergiev (it is available on DVD and was shown on TV as well in several countries)?

Really a lot of gears on stage! But practically no circle involute form. So does this mean that in Turandot's times they had another gear geometry, or did the stage designer simply have no idea how to construct the curves?

And maybe it should symbolize something in connection with the composer, Berio, who wrote a new version for the finale of this opera, left unfinished by Puccini—"If the gears would be human beings."

With kind regards,
Dr. Uwe Schulz, gear mathematician
Wendt Diawal
Neukirch-Egnach, Switzerland