the fabricator® blog

FABTECH 'exceeded our expectations'

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Economically speaking, it's been a grim year. Few industries have escaped the repercussions of the downturn, and ours—metal manufacturing—is among the hardest hit. It was under a heavy cloud of concern that a stressed, worried industry came together at the 2009 FABTECH® International & AWS Welding Show, including METALFORM earlier this week. Exhibitors wondered if attendees would come.

Would companies that are making drastic cutbacks spring for the cost of sending people to the show? Would those who came buy?

They came, they saw, and they bought. (TRUMPF sold four machines the first day.) FABTECH 2009 exceeded exhibitors'—and editors'—expectations.

Like the average tradeshow attendee, editors who cover FABTECH always are interested in product development and technology enhancements. Eager to provide our audiences with the very latest information, we set up appointments with exhibitors, attend press conferences, and walk the aisles, intently looking for unique, perhaps unheralded, product introductions and breakthroughs. We also visit with attendees and try to gauge the overall mindset and status of the industry.

Here's my honest assessment of the show.

In the 10 years that I have attended FABTECH, I've never seen one quite like this. Exhibitors that typically boast huge, multilevel booths cut back on booth size, which meant they had to be very selective in choosing which equipment to showcase. This also meant that many smaller booths were more visible than they may have been in the past when overshadowed by megabooths.

Yes, downsizing a booth undoubtedly reflects a company's increased concern about spending. Suppliers are feeling their customers' pains right where it hurts everyone—in the bottom line.

Downsizing also *could* have something to do with being sensitive to the industry's conditions. Even if you are fortunate enough to have been relatively unscathed by the recession, would you want to rub your success in the faces of those who've been less fortunate? I don't think so, but maybe that's just me.

Downsizing extended beyond booth sizes. Some companies exhibited scaled-down, yet powerful machines designed to make their technologies more affordable. Among them were OMAX (MAXIEM 1530 waterjet), Knuth Machine Tools USA (KHT-A shears), Anchor Danley (ball bearing component assembly system), and TRUMPF (TruLaser 1030).

Something many companies did not downsize was R&D. TRUMPF introduced six new products this year. One is the TruLaser 1030, which was developed and is produced in the U.S.

Combining its new products and their accessories, The Lincoln Electric Co. introduced 108 items in 2009—actually, in nine months. A staggering number of product introductions in any year.

Lincoln and other welding equipment manufacturers should have been on the FABTECH shuttle with me Tuesday evening overhearing the conversation I heard between two attendees. A long-time fabricator who makes gangways shared his thoughts about the perfect welding torch with his seatmate. Complaining about having to turn a dial to increase amperage, this welder from Maine offered up what he considers to be a "million-dollar idea" for the simplest, most user-friendly torch—if he could just get someone to make it. I'm not a welding expert, but what I heard made sense to me. (Contact me and I'll put you in touch with this gentleman.)

A term I heard frequently from both show exhibitors and attendees was "partnership." Opening day, I ran into Don Begneaud, Begneaud Manufacturing, at the Fabricators & Manufacturers Association International booth. Don said his main reason for attending the show was to promote partnerships among industry companies.

Jay Hall, Harco Metal Products, spoke from the Wafios booth about his experience combining a Wafios tube bender with an Aicon vision sensor to complete a complicated job. He couldn't say enough about how well the system worked for him. He, too, is interested in meeting others who might be interested in partnering.

There's an old saying— United we stand; Divided we fall. (Starting to hum the song, aren't you?) It's true. Now may be the time to take smart steps to increase market share, but it's also time to pull together to strengthen the metal manufacturing industry. A one-hundred-percent share of an obliterated market is nothing.

Of all the exhibitors I spoke with, only one said the show was disappointing. This company makes a unique product for welders—an ergonomic welding chair. I mentioned the disappointment to someone who works directly for a major welding equipment supplier who said she thought she'd buy one just to make the exhibitor feel better! That's what I'm talking about. Banding together, supporting each other, and exceeding expectations. Does a soul and an industry good.