

Back on solid ground

The HMA is building on its successful 2006 iHobbyExpo, promoting the industry and promising an even bigger show in 2007

BY HAL MILLER

With its first show under its belt as a decision-making entity, the Hobby Manufacturers Association is looking forward to promoting the industry and producing a bigger, better iHobbyExpo in 2007.

By most accounts, the 2006 iHobby show was a big success. Manufacturers, retailers and distributors reported solid trade traffic and improved public attendance, certainly over the 2005 Los Angeles show and even from the 2004 event in Rosemont. For the first time in several years, the show made money.

"It was a real morale booster for the industry," says outgoing HMA Secretary-Treasurer Frank Ritola of Model Rectifier Corporation. The return to the Chicago area, where the show is contracted through 2008, some new exhibitors and a shift to more manufacturer-run seminars gave a new pulse to a show that many saw as on life support after Los Angeles.

Redefining the trade show's role

Despite the show being back on a firm footing, you still hear exhibitors saying, "Yeah, this is good, but I remember when you could hardly walk through the aisles on the trade days." Chances are, iHobby, and trade shows in general, will never return to that volume of traffic.

"I think we all need to be realistic," says Xuron's Abby Robey, who heads the HMA's General Hobby Division. "We are in a different age."

That age includes the rise of the Internet, which puts information in manufacturers', distributors' and dealers' hands almost immediately. The result is there's no magic to the new-product rollouts that, 15 years ago, happened only a few times a year.

Show Committee Chairman Fred Hill, owner of model-railroad manufacturer The Coach Yard, says the whole product manufacturing and release process itself has undergone a shift, and can sum it up in one

word: China. Products are manufactured there at an unprecedented rate and at costs that can keep retailers worldwide profitable. Keeping costs low means the factories must constantly produce. "Any hiccup could be economically disastrous to them," Hill says.

Because the factories are always producing, products are released all year. In a competitive market, companies aren't waiting to release at a show. With so many similar products, the speed with which companies can get them to market often determines profitability.

HMA BROCHURES



"Hobbies ... for the fun of it" brochures are available to members and affiliate organizations for distribution at events. To request copies, contact Pat Koziol at 973-283-9088 or by e-mail, pat.koziol@hmahobby.org.

That said, there is still great value in iHobbyExpo. "I enjoy the face-to-face contact," says Robey. That contact was key to the success at the 2006 show, on the floor and in the manufacturer-led seminars.

These classes, run by MRC, Märklin and Iwata-Medea, allowed manufacturers to show dealers how to use and sell the companies' products. Such contact between manufacturers and retailers is invaluable.

Keeping its mission in mind

One might think the HMA is all about iHobbyExpo, but the show is, in large part, what allows the organization to accomplish its primary mission: promoting the hobby industry.

The two public days at the recent show exposed more than 15,000 people to at least some of everything the industry has to offer. Even so, the HMA is expanding product depth and adding more companies to the exhibitor list. Robotics were new and big this year and will return in 2007. Also, Koziol, who manages the show through Peak Management Solutions, says many new events are under discussion.

In 2006, HMA rolled out a series of brochures to attract new consumers to the hobby world. The full-color publications depict family members enjoying R/C, model railroad and plastic model hobbies, and bear the slogan, "Hobbies ... for the fun of it." HMA also launched a consumer Web site, www.myhobbyfun.com, which includes tips and techniques in each model category as well as a retail store directory. HMA Executive Director Pat Koziol says considerable time will be spent in 2007 adding content and tools to the Web site.

Raising the show profile

Events alone aren't going to get the public to the show. The HMA contracted with Dave Swanson and Competitive Intelligence Advertising (CIA) to promote the show to the public in print, radio and television. CIA, which has had promotional success with the World's Greatest Hobby on Tour shows, came through with the crowds, boosting public attendance by 7,000 people over the 2004 tally, and 9,000 over the Los Angeles totals.

There were a number of high-profile exhibitors who skipped the 2006 expo because of conflicts or unhappiness with the attendance in L.A. However, the HMA is working to get them back. According to Koziol, some have already reserved booth space in 2007 after seeing the success of 2006.

The 2007 iHobbyExpo is slated for Oct. 18-21 at the Donald E. Stephens Convention Center in Rosemont, Ill. □