



Business Is Changing

And The International Travel Goods Show is, too

By Garrett Lai | As an industry we count on it, rely on it – we bank on it. Sometimes we bet our businesses on it. It is The International Travel Goods Show, our industry's biggest trade event.

The Show is one of our best indicators of industry health. It's the gathering point that rallies all of us, bringing together retailers, manufacturers, distributors, journalists – everyone whose livelihood depends on the travel goods industry.

The key to The Show's endurance lies in the way it has evolved with the times to remain fresh and relevant, enabling it to experience record-setting growth over the past few years, benefitting everyone in the industry.

But the world is changing in just about every aspect – retail, manufacturing, trade relations, and politics. And The International Travel Goods Show is changing, too.

A Good State of Health

THE INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL GOODS SHOW IS AT A HIGH POINT in its history. What began as a small hotel room event in 1938, hosted by the Luggage and Leather Goods Manufacturers of America (LLGMA) trade association, has become the premier event for the travel goods industry.

To say The Show has grown tremendously over the past year would be an understatement. The 2016 Show set a record for the number of exhibitors, with 313 companies spotlighting their latest and greatest. And this year The Show set a size record, with a footprint of 161,560 square feet. It's an enormous show for an industry this size.

"TGA has done an excellent job attracting new vendors

and suppliers to The Show,” states current TGA Board Chair Robert Dodson of Ricardo Beverly Hills. “The number of companies displaying product has grown steadily over the past seven to eight years. Attendees and retailers have more products and companies to see than ever before.”

In an industry that relies on innovation to fuel consumer purchases, the number of first-time exhibitors is a reliable indicator of industry health, and for the past few years nearly a third of exhibiting companies have been first-timers. So even as travel waned in the wake of 9/11, and again after the 2008 recession, The Show has bounced back, repeatedly, due to this steady influx of new innovators.

Upping the Game

THE FACT THAT THE TRAVEL GOODS Association (TGA) runs The Show is a huge advantage. Unlike most trade shows that are either owned or managed by third parties, TGA can take the long view on both The Show and the industry, which means the Association can invest resources to build a better Show.

At a time when trade shows worldwide are shrinking in size – or going out of business altogether – The International Travel Goods Show has grown to a record-setting size, thanks to the long-term vision of TGA regarding its prize trade show, and its important role of exposing the industry to new ideas and products. “We hear that our Show is too expensive for exhibitors, but that couldn’t be further from the truth,” states TGA President Michele Marini Pittenger. “TGA knows The Show can be a financial challenge for exhibitors, especially considering the current retail climate, which is why the Board of Directors has continued to keep early-bird booth fees (\$10 per square foot) in the bottom 10% of all U.S. trade shows, despite having sold out our last three shows.”

The past couple of years has seen The Show transition from what the trade show industry calls a pipe-and-drape show to an all-hardwall exhibit floor, and that’s entirely due to TGA’s willingness to invest. Pipe-and-drape is cheap – but it looks cheap; hard-

Then: Pipe-and-drape



Now: Hardwall booth



Then and Now: Elimination of pipe-and-drape booths (left) in exchange for hardwall booths (right) has given The Show better presentation and a more professional feel. Light Flight took the opportunity to get creative with their hardwall booth and took the 2017 Best Booth Award in the 100-square-foot category.



The Buzz Award is a successful Show add-on that improves attendee engagement, and is a PR boon for winners who’ve leveraged the award to boost their new product launches. Popticals was ecstatic to have garnered the coveted award in 2017.

wall adds a level of professionalism and visual impact. “Graphics can be applied directly to the hardwall panels rather than just hanging a banner off of a pole,” observes TGA Board Chair-Elect and Show Committee Chair David Lomas of Design Go. “Hardwall booths have much better lines, and The Show looks much cleaner and more modern.” Savvy exhibitors like Light Flight, winner of a Best Booth Award in the 100-square-foot category, have used the walls as a blank canvas to create fun, evocative displays with minimal budget and staff investment.

The Show continues to generate exhibitor energy with its Best Booth and Buzz Awards, voted on by attending retailers and media. In fact, the Best Booth Award began as an experiment prompted by David Lomas. “I suggested that in order to raise the quality of the booths we should reward those vendors who put in the extra effort,” explains Lomas. “I was shocked to hear the opinion that product was king and the booth

doesn’t matter, in which case all retail stores should just be concrete blocks with no branding!” There is no question more professional booth presentation elevates The Show – for everyone – and what began as an experiment has become a new Show fixture, deliberately limited to the smaller-footprint exhibitors to reward inventiveness and ingenuity (as opposed to bigger booths, which often reflect more of a willingness to spend).

The Buzz Award has become a favorite for exhibitors and attendees alike, a useful barometer of retailer interest. “I think a number of vendors have benefitted because the award has raised their profile,” remarks Lomas. “We get plenty of participants so it must mean a lot to the vendors and the visitors who vote.” Buzz Awards have helped exhibitors garner extra industry and media attention and create a bigger splash – especially for first-time exhibitors.

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Going Global

ONE OF THE LARGEST DRIVERS FOR THE Show's recent growth spurt has been an expanding percentage of international exhibitors, the result of a TGA Board of Directors' initiative to broaden the scope of The Show to make it a truly global event. The influx of international exhibitors brought the numbers up, but more significantly, it infused The Show with new energy. Almost exactly one-third of all exhibitors are headquartered outside the U.S. borders. More significantly, more than 40% of first-time



TGA's Awards Ceremony adds energy to The Show, connecting the industry with a positive vibe that celebrates individual achievement and industry accomplishment.

exhibitors – companies largely founded on innovative new product – hail from the international ranks. So the international companies haven't just bolstered The Show's numbers, they're putting a lot of drive into the industry's innovation engine.

"New exhibitors always add excitement to The Show," says Michele Marini Pittenger. "And new international exhibitors bring even more to the party – a different cultural perspective, a different approach to problem-solving. The end result? Better products, stronger competition and more to discover at The Show."

"The influx of international vendors has sharpened the attitude of their American counterparts," notes David Lomas, whose day job is Managing Director of travel accessories giant Design Go, headquartered in London. "An inward-looking Show that had only U.S. suppliers wouldn't have grown like it has." And that growth has definitely been a positive for The Show and for TGA.

Face-to-Face Impact

THE RISE OF THE INTERNET HAS LED TO less and less face time in business, making The Show all the more vital. There is no substitute for real interpersonal interaction, as a recent study in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* showed when researchers discovered face-to-face interactions were 34 times more likely to elicit a positive response than email. That's a huge difference, and palpable enough to bring retailers and exhibitors back to The Show again and

again. These personal interactions are also valuable because of who's involved. The Show is the only gathering of the industry's top-level management, and it's a chance for retailers to connect with people who influence the products they order and the companies they do business with. "Before, The Show was more of a window-shopping experience and retailers were very reticent to make specific appointments," observes TGA Board Immediate Past Chair Scott Kosmin of 24/7 International. "Today, retailers are much more focused, they really plan out their visit, making sure they have specific key appointments with vendors they do business with. They're a lot more substantive, more detailed, and involve senior management from both sides."

Footprint Size Matters

SOME HAVE OBSERVED THAT THERE IS noticeably less foot traffic in the aisles

since the 2008 recession. There are multiple reasons for this, but there are two largely responsible for this appearance: The Show has nearly doubled its footprint. And retailers are bringing fewer personnel to The Show.

Being big is an advantage in the trade show business, and TGA's Board of Directors recognized this and proceeded to grow The Show with a number of initiatives, including an early-bird discount for early space reservations, lower membership dues and reduced booth charges. These were uniformly successful, and along with the push for international exhibitors The Show grew.

"I think in our quest to increase the size of The Show, which was our desire, the same number of buyers are coming," says Jack Holodnicki of Olivet International, TGA Board Vice Chair, who notes that when the town grows but the population stays the same, it inevitably starts to look less crowded. This effect was compounded by the fact that many larger exhibitors took advantage of lower per-square-foot fees to expand their displays, further contributing to an inflated Show footprint.

On the attendee side, retail is consolidating, and with centralized purchasing each merger means fewer buyers service the same number of stores – it's one of the efficiencies that makes consolidation profitable, but it lowers the head count at The Show. And since the 2008 recession, which hit travel and the travel products industry particularly hard, retailers have reevaluated how many people they need to send to The Show. "We can't make more retailers. And the travel goods industry, in terms of volume, is bigger than ever," observes Jack Holodnicki. "In the past there might be 10 people from a major retailer, now they send two." Scott Kosmin adds, "the reality is we see less people at The Show; but it's not that we have fewer retailers."

Tightening Up

WHILE THE SHOW IS SUCCESSFUL, ITS big footprint can create a perception of open space and empty aisles on the exhibit floor. A new floor plan is being introduced in 2018 that is tighter and makes better use of floor space. "Ten people in a dance hall is lonely," explains Jack Holodnicki. "But those same 10 people in a living room is a



More imaginative booths and an influx of international exhibitors have fueled The Show's recent growth spurt, making it a truly global phenomenon. Pictured here is London-based Go Travel's 2017



"Go Flies" booth and Herschel Supply Company's Best Booth Award winner in the 400-square-foot category.

party. The Show will be more energetic, with less space between people, less space between booths. A little crowding is actually desirable in creating more energy on the floor; more connectivity between everyone there."

Booking is Tough

WHERE THE SHOW FALLS ON THE calendar is one of the most contentious aspects of its operation, and, unfortunately, it's something that's not entirely within TGA's control. This is one of the most hotly-debated items in Show planning, and a problem not easily solved. It's important that The Show be accessible to as many people as possible. But that can be tricky, since the busiest weeks on the calendar for manufacturers and retailers are different. If The Show is too early, manufacturers may not have production items ready to exhibit. Too late, and it's too close to the spring break surge for retailers to attend, and not very timely for order

placement. "Historically, The Show has been held the first quarter of the year forever and ever," says Scott Kosmin. "But that's the number-one trade show time of year for Las Vegas, and every other venue in the country. It's very difficult to get guaranteed the same time every year. We do everything possible, five to seven years in advance, to make sure we have The Show take place in a timeframe that works best for retailers and exhibitors."

Further complicating matters is the fact that we are a relatively small event. "Big events that bring tens of thousands of attendees obviously get priority, which limits our calendar selection to dates where other bookings at the Las Vegas Convention Center (LVCC) have enough leftover space to accommodate us," explains Michele Marini Pittenger. "It's not like we can book first, and the LVCC then slots bigger events around us." In fact, this was the reason for the sudden date shift this year, as our preferred time window – early March – was heavily impacted by the March 7-11 dates for ConExpo, a behemoth show held in Las Vegas every three years,

that draws 2,800 exhibitors, 130,000 attendees, and has a 2,500,000-square-foot footprint that dominates almost every exhibit venue in Las Vegas for up to three weeks. And that means three weeks worth of events displaced by ConExpo are forced to find substitute dates and venues.

We Like Las Vegas

OUR RETAILERS LIKE LAS VEGAS, WHICH is relatively affordable and easy to get to, and literally has more hotel rooms to choose from than any other city on the planet. "Our best-attended years have been in Las Vegas," notes Scott Kosmin. "We have to make host city decisions 100% based on Show vitality, and do whatever we can to ensure the biggest and best attendance. And for us that means Las Vegas."

One way to sidestep ConExpo would be to switch cities entirely. But that's trickier than it sounds. It's logistically daunting for big exhibitors, who may face different move-in and move-out cost structures depending on the venue, and who have invested in the Las Vegas infrastructure. "If we're at the same location every year it reduces costs and makes them predictable," says Jack Holodnicki, reflecting on his experience with Olivet International. "We don't have to ship our booth, we can leave it stored in Las Vegas. We know what our drayage [move-in/move-out fees] will be and what our lodging will be."

Calendar Competition

THE SHOW'S TIMING ALSO DEPENDS on other shows' timing, which may not even take place in Las Vegas. The International Home + Housewares Show in Chicago is one example, because big department stores lump buying responsibility for travel products and housewares together. Holding The Show concurrently with the Housewares Show forces buyers to split time between both events, which negatively impacts both exhibitors – especially the big ones who rely on that department store

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business – and retailers who find themselves in a position of having to choose between the two shows. The Outdoor Retailer Winter Market is another, as many International Travel Goods Show exhibitors will also exhibit there, and don't necessarily have the personnel and resources to attend two big shows one after the other. And as The Show continues to attract more and more international exhibitors and attendees, it's become increasingly important to keep the spring dates of the I.L.M Winter Leather Goods Fair in Offenbach, Germany front of mind when scheduling our Show.

And then there are holidays that can impact The Show experience. One of the most significant is also almost invisible to show attendees, and that's Chinese New Year, which can shut down manufacturing for two weeks in the country where most travel goods are produced. Passover, which is also observed according to a lunar calendar, usually falls in March but can come in April (this year it was April 10-18). And Easter, which can fall between March 22 and April 25, makes travel personally difficult for retailers, but also marks the beginning of spring travel season when they cannot leave their stores short-handed to attend The Show.

Change is Good

CHANGE IS INTEGRAL TO BUSINESS, and no more so than today. "The world is changing at its fastest pace ever, and we've all been educated to accept that the pace of change will only get faster," notes Robert Dodson. And as travel goods change to reflect shifts in travel, trade shows evolve to mirror how business is accomplished.

"Right The Show's strength is in providing a top-to-top perspective, an opportunity for exhibitors to have their top-level executives connect with top-level retail managers without the distraction of whatever crises du jour might be in their building," says Scott Kosmin. "It's an important annual venue when manufacturers and retailers can come together to evaluate design, product and market strategies, as opposed to doing so piecemeal through the year."



The Opening Night Party has improved markedly, becoming a welcome respite from the pure-business Show floor and helping connect the people behind the companies, stores, brands and partnerships that make this industry thrive.



Robert Dodson adds, "The Show can remain relevant as the one place any type of retailer can go to see the latest and greatest in the travel goods industry. We need to work hard at attracting retailers from around the world. And once they are here, we need to create excitement at The Show – entertain the industry – and keep them coming back."

New for 2018

ONE NEW SHOW FEATURE CURRENTLY in the planning stages are small exhibitor "pods" – 5'x5' open booth areas placed in the wider aisles earmarked for just-launched crowdfunding companies with a single product, like you'd normally see on Kickstarter and the like. By lowering the barrier to exhibiting, The Show will be exposed to small, brand-new companies – and their new brand-new ideas. "These pods will be a big asset in keeping things fresh," David Lomas enthuses. "Low level with an inexpensive all-in price to attract new blood!"

Michele Marini Pittenger stresses that one of the most important tasks facing Show staff in the weeks and months ahead is looking at ways to increase buyer attendance. "This is our number-one priority," says Pittenger. "We're the industry's biggest trade event, with the strongest exhibitor showing – and we're going to build attendance with the same

energy we brought to recruiting new exhibitors. We're going to be aggressively reaching out to new buyer markets and creating a more invigorating Show environment."

"People associate travel products with out-of-town trips, but travel goods are items you use every time you leave the house," stresses Pittenger. "Which means there are a lot of retailers who sell our products – especially items like day bags, business cases and wallets – who don't categorize themselves as travel goods retailers. We're going to be reaching out to retailer segments that fit this mold, and show their members how The International Travel Goods Show can help their businesses."

"This will be a challenging time, but The Show and TGA have a history of rising to just such occasions," notes Pittenger. "We were one of the hardest-hit industries in the aftermath of 9/11, and again after elective travel and business trips were severely curtailed in the wake of 2008's recession, but look at us now. We're stronger as an industry, and we've doubled The Show's footprint over the past seven years, while trade shows in general have diminished in size and in number."

"These are exciting times for TGA and we've got more than a few surprises up our sleeve," promises Pittenger. "Trust me when I say The 2018 Show is one you will not want to miss, and it will be like nothing you have seen before!"