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The Show Must Go On

At press time, the staff of UP Media Group has just returned from the combined IPC APEX/EXPO conference and exhibition held in Anaheim in late February. And, from the indications on the show floor and in the conference sessions, the electronics manufacturing business in North America is on a fast crawl toward recovery.

The exhibit hall was buzzing with bodies and activity, and some conference sessions were rumored to be in close danger of breaching fire codes because of how many attendees showed up. Many exhibitors (at least on the APEX side of the hall) reported selling equipment right off the floor and said that their demo sessions were well booked weeks before the show began.

And my own personal—yeah, very unscientific—measurement of how good an electronics manufacturing show in Anaheim happens to be is how packed the show hotel bars are after the exhibition closes for the day. In this case, the show seemed pretty darn good as the bars at both the Anaheim Hilton and Marriott were both swarming with thirsty exhibitors and attendees who imbibed well into the night. And, no, they weren't drowning their sorrows; instead, many were relating successes of the day and rejoicing at the fact that business was finally picking up in North America.

But let's talk numbers. In a North American electronics manufacturing economy that's still shrinking, the combined show managed to attract slightly more attendees this year than the two shows attracted together in 2003. Recently released from IPC, the total attendee count for 2004 for the combined shows was 5,700, with total visitors (both attendees and exhibitors) at 10,200.

Last year, the attendee count for the shows—after combining numbers IPC recently re-released—was 5,300, with total visitor count remaining the same as 2004 at 10,200.

Unfortunately, IPC would not release the breakdown of numbers between APEX and EXPO, so a direct comparison of how well either show performed this year as compared to last year was not possible.

Numbers, however, don't always tell the whole story. From the smiling mugs on the exhibitors' faces, the attendees packing the technical conferences and free forums, and the general excitement surrounding the show, all "non-scientific" indications are that the show was a success. It certainly did much to lift the spirits of those in attendance.

While lifted, those hearty souls remained grounded, though, in realizing the hard work and investment that will be necessary over the next few years to keep North America at the leading-edge of electronics

manufacturing—if not by volume, at least by technology capability.

Tuesday's keynoter Michael Cannon, president and CEO of Solectron, opened his speech with the quip that, prior to the electronics manufacturing services (EMS) market, he worked in the aerospace and the disk drive industries. In succession—from aerospace to disk drives to EMS—he's seen his industries' margins shrink to just a third of the prior industry in which he worked. And oppressive pressure, especially in EMS, continues today.

With margin pressures like that, how can North America have the resources to invest in remaining competitive, technology-wise? According to Cannon, those same, gut-wrenching margins are actually motivating companies like Solectron to become more flexible and to attain process efficiencies like Six Sigma. Cannon related that initiatives like Six Sigma provide companies with precision and asset utilization they couldn't otherwise obtain, and these benefits come in handy when manufacturing orders and schedules are constantly changing. As Cannon pointed out, customers are getting used to on-demand manufacturing, and they're not going back to the old days of storing inventory.

In this new age of flexibility, may the most agile OEMs, EMS providers and suppliers win. And return to next year's APEX.



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