

The Business of Baseball

ABCA – San Diego Trade Show Surprise Success with Vendors

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In a year that saw many of the major trade shows take big hits in attendance and exhibitor sales, the ABCA trade show posted increases in both. The attendance was up in two categories. The number of coaches this year was 2835, up from 2462 at the last convention in San Diego in 1999. Even the wives came out in full force this year, with an all time high attendance of 423. ABCA is committed to attracting more wives by providing additional programming specifically for their interests.

Perhaps a bigger indicator of the Convention's success is the steady increase in exhibitors and the size of booth spaces rented. The San Diego venue attracted an increase of 40 booth sales from the 1999 show in the same location. This year there were 303 booths sold, 60 of which were new exhibitors from last years show in Orlando. But even with snowstorms, 9/11, and fluctuations in the economy, the tradeshow aspect of the ABCA Convention continues to grow. While it might be dangerous to use the ABCA trade show to predict the overall mood of the economy, the show presented an optimistic atmosphere to those who attended.

Was the San Diego climate a factor? Not necessarily. According to ABCA's Executive Director Dave Keilitz, west coast convention sites draw less participation than mid-west and east coast sites. This is primarily due to a lesser density of coaching population on the west coast and greater travel costs. Several interviews with vendors revealed that sales at the booths were up as well, as were their spirits! Nike indicated they saw a surprise upturn in last minute convention sales just before the season begins. Most of Nike's 2003 season sales had been made prior to the show.

Gene Grant of Atec revealed that the actual convention tent-like building kept booth sales personnel upbeat. The bright, airy and high ceiling environment placed everyone in a congenial mood. Grant also said that the flow of this year's floor traffic was definitely patterned in coordination with clinicians. "When you have a good speaker the floor is empty". However, a well-balanced convention is a masterful mix of clinicians, clinic topics, location and vendors. This year's show seemed to have it all.

John Allen of Paul Pryor Travel Bags, Inc. points out that the difference between the ABCA show and corporate conventions is the multiple agendas many participants have. "They (coaches) come to learn, attend meetings, share a camaraderie and passion for baseball, and they come to see new products as well as old standards", Allen described.

High tech vendors all agree that the sport of baseball is the least likely of any sport to embrace technology of any sort. Golf, tennis, football and basketball are years ahead of baseball. But baseball is showing signs of coming around, one vendor said.

That was echoed in many clinics, with their repeated references to making the most efficient use of time. The decrease in paid staff, practice time, and budgets, combined

with constant pressure from NCAA at many levels, all contribute to the management challenges of coaching. High tech vendors all indicate that the emerging technology will increase time productivityif baseball will let it. Coaches faced with the constant management directive to “do more with less” will have to investigate time saving technological alternatives to past methods.

Many coaches express that the initial costs of technology exceed their budgets. It is clear that high tech marketers must overcome that objection. Technology manufacturers must present the baseball community with cost justification economics just as they have done with other market sectors. This trade show, as does every other trade show, demonstrated many levels of technological sophistication, detail, and cost to fit every budget and need. Baseball should respond by reassessing their budgetary priorities.

From the player’s perspective, the day when every student has his own computer may not be to far off. In many areas of the country it has already happen. Many coaches will soon see 1990 “date of births.” Doesn’t that give you pause? You may be playing a losing game with them if you are resistant to incorporating technology into your program.

The trade show had it all – from the foot arch supports to cage supports, soft cups to ball cleansing machines (probably a poor comparison) to new gloves and new dirt. The ABCA staff, board, and President Danny Hall’s efforts really paid off in many ways for many diverse interests.