

OUT OF CONTEXT | KURT GRAY

OR's Expanding Participation, Changing Significance

The Outdoor Retailer Summer show this year was the biggest ever with 455,000 square-feet of exhibition space and more than 22,000 participants. It was decidedly more robust and dynamic than in the past.

The buzz of the show was the wide spectrum of new exhibitors and the change in the demographics of the people in the crowded aisles; it seemed as if the atmosphere had somewhat the vibe of an amusement park or consumer show.

Overall, I believe what we are seeing is the morphing of the OR Show into the new and improved: Outdoor Lifestyle Show. Granted, this has been an ongoing transition, but with this show the genesis seems all but complete.

A good signpost to this shift is a quote from Greg Wazer of Leki, "Everyone has access to the outdoors, right at the end of their driveway." He speaks of the value system of merely wanting to be outside which is now the uniting force in the industry.

The outdoor market, as reflected by this show, is expanding and includes both retailers and brands farther from core outdoor values. The Industry's hardy, recession-resistant retail landscape, combined with the hip and upscale consciousness of the participants, makes Outdoor Retailer fertile ground for powerful outsiders. Witness; "Outdoor Retailer provides us with new distribution opportunities that allow us to grow," Graham Stapleberg, Billabong. I think what he's saying is, thank you for allowing his company to sell to retailers that traditional outdoor companies used to sell to.

Note, the core outdoor companies and their gravity-worshipping lifestyles are still at OR, for now at least, but their presence is certainly being diluted by the expanding participation and the changing significance of the show. There is now more of a backyard barbeque sensibility.

Natural, vintage, responsible, and on vacation: Apparel design reflected a broader vision of the outdoor industry with relaxed sportswear that appeared more hippie-chic and sandal-based than in years past. Much more clothing with personality was present; with lifestyle apparel clearly the dominate specie. Technical offerings split ever deeper along the lines of: technical clothing as outdoor adventure equipment vs. technical clothing meant to be worn as casual wear. Emerging is another independent viewpoint, that of the urbanist, or urban landscape outdoorsman, which is done well by Nau, Kuhl, Merrell and Sierra Designs. As always, Patagonia rocks with its own inimitable California style.

The OR Show remains an increasingly important technical and general sourcing venue and a growing military show. That back-room business, away from the crowds, is getting stronger as more and more specialized players from across the apparel spectrum realize the targeted audience and accessible venue that OR and Salt Lake City provide.

FYI: Outdoor Retailer Winter Market - Jan 19- 22, 2012.

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