

## Curated or Carnival



Back in the fax and toner age, tradeshow were a different kind of gathering. It was hard for one to see the breadth of product available in a market. There was no internet or social media to quickly filter and highlight the fashion cycle. Buyers relied on magazines, travel, and their own personal shopping to find new and different apparel to fuel their store's growth. Tradeshow condensed all that searching into a single space, allowing buyers to compare and contrast their choices and ultimately, just like the customers in their stores back home, buy what they needed for their business. It worked great.

Global sourcing and economies of scale in far-away lands changed that picture. The production managers wanted order dates pushed farther and farther back on

the calendar as their own development and production timelines lengthened. The retailers in turn bargained for more flexible terms and discounts in order to drop their paper earlier in the sales cycle, when they don't yet fully know the repercussions of last year's choices. Both sides ultimately got what they wanted, and tradeshow stayed relevant because they offer a chance for buyers to get together with other retail wizards, spend time with their brands, and check-in on what has been "bought" for next year.

The shows also responded by becoming more social and more about the party and less about the business. The door opened for bigger and more "club-like" booths, while the atmosphere changed from one where people were

actually making life and death decisions regarding their retail businesses, to a homogeneity of backslapping inclusiveness and come-back-for-beer-at-4. With major preseasons safely tucked away, emphasis shifted from selling to staying sold.

Currently the spectrum of choice in our culture is expanding, and our ability to control it increases every day. The earth, from a consumer's point of view, is flattening out dramatically; we can access what we want, when we want. Buyers expect the same.

The tradeshow architecture that reflects that shift is already here. An event more than a convention, it is a traveling combine of selected guests, i.e. companies that fit the internet reflection of that particular market. The

preselection criteria, i.e. the exhibitors already being "winners" in the eyes of the organizers, removes one whole step from the buying process. Although smaller and less inclusive, these shows are in the buyer's best interests because of the applied filter and focus. Buyers can wander a more personal sized venue and taste the intangibles of color, fabric and form that will make that same merchandise irresistible in their own stores. There is the time and space to absorb subtleties of design and appreciate the projection of culture each brand is pioneering.

The shopping that is done at these shows is profoundly different from the old school version. Now the buyers' math is totaled in hashtags and tweets. However, the fundamental idea is still the same, people like to buy clothing they can see and touch, and it is fun to buy interesting clothing from interesting people.

Both kinds of tradeshow fill our calendars, but for how much longer? Can the big carnival-like tradeshow, where treasures must be unearthed amidst the frat party atmosphere really hang-on against the idea of curated taste and clean presentation? Will once-a-year mega trade gatherings be undercut by smaller collections, a more flexible schedule and digestible content? Chaos versus choreographed? I think grace wins every time. ●

Kurt Gray is older than dirt and should get outside more often. His ideas and opinions are not necessarily shared by the publisher. Or really anyone else for that matter.