

Show Business

The leaders of footwear's top trade events discuss the evolution of their shows and why they are bullish about spring. BY ERIN E. CLACK

The outlook for spring '13 is bright. As the trade show season kicks off this month, organizers of the industry's biggest domestic events told *Footwear News* there is a general feeling the shoe business is bouncing back. Buoyed by strong spring sales and positive momentum expected for fall, the industry is anticipating even bigger gains in 2013.

The directors of the major shows also spoke about supporting and promoting new exhibitors, utilizing social media to enhance the event experience and the changing role of trade shows.

Here, Leslie Gallin, VP of FN Platform; Kenji Haroutunian, VP and show director of Outdoor Retailer; David Kahan, president of ENK Footwear Group; Joe Moore, president and CEO of FFANY; and Laura Conwell-O'Brien, executive director of The Atlanta Shoe Market, weigh in on what's next for their events and the industry at large.

What is the mood within the industry heading into the spring market?

LG: The feeling is very positive. I always say the footwear industry is a window to the next six months of the economy, and right now, the economy is showing strong signs of improvement. So the footwear business will mirror that. We're also seeing the Europeans coming back [to our show], and that's another encouraging sign of the positive direction in which the business is headed.

DK: I would say the mood is cautiously optimistic regarding retail spending. The economy remains challenging, but footwear is an exciting category and buyers are hungry for fresh product.

KH: The mood is very bullish. We are clearly climbing out of the recession, and Outdoor Retailer is one of the few shows that has remained pretty strong and continued to grow through [this tough

period]. The [outdoor] industry [tends to do] well during recession times because people want to get back to basics, to recreation.

JM: Everybody is trying to stay on track and, above all, remain positive. There is growing business for both the retailer and the vendor, which are both doing their best to [gauge] where the economy is going.

LCO: Retailers are feeling very cautious, but they are definitely optimistic and hunting for new product to keep their stores fresh. Exhibitors are still struggling because the retail base is shrinking and they are trying hard to get their product viewed by retailers. In saying that, though, there are many exhibitors doing very well.

What are your biggest concerns for this buying season?

DK: Talk to anyone in the industry about what's keeping them up at night and the conversation turns to sourcing issues, from costs to supply partners to timelines. This is why we decided to focus on making ENKWSA the industry's single-largest show for sourcing. It's the guts of the footwear industry, and there needs to be a show dedicated to meeting the needs of product development and design teams.

LG: The uncertain economic situa-

tion and the changes that brings remain a concern. But people seem to have accepted that things are going to continue to be difficult and they are focusing their energy on finding new and better ways to resolve issues and grow their businesses.

JM: I'm mainly concerned about the slow-growing economy and the social and financial instability in Europe, and its effect on our day-to-day business growth in the U.S.

LCO: My main concern is retailers not spending the dollars to buy product because they are still trying to figure out where the economy is headed. And a lot of manufacturers are fighting to stay in business, as the last few years have been very difficult.

KH: The one sore spot has been winter and resort-based sports. We had very little snow this past year, [resulting in] a difficult season at retail and a 30 percent to 40 percent decline at the brand level. [People are] choking on a lot of inventory, and that affects their open to buy. It's definitely going to put a damper on purchasing power for 2012 [into] 2013.

How are you helping buyers make the most of their time at the show?

LG: At our last show, we introduced a new system of naming the aisles with streets and avenues. We'll push that forward with more color-coding and clearer signage so buyers don't waste time finding their way around. We



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continue to expand our educational seminar program, focusing on the key topics and issues impacting the business right now. And because we know so many buyers are coming to the show to find new product, we're identifying all the new brands in an easy-to-use format.

DK: We will grow this August to house two separate and focused exhibit halls. One will be dedicated to sourcing and every element of the supply chain. It will feature factory exhibitors from all global sourcing bases, as well as materials suppliers. A design team or a private-label buyer can meet directly with pre-qualified representatives, and we will provide matchmaking services and interpreters to help facilitate [meetings]. The second hall will house all fast-fashion exhibitors, a growing portion of the business for many retailers.

KH: We've made a number of upgrades to our mobile app, and for the first time we are installing way-finders in the Salt Palace. These are active, touch-screen floor plans with walking maps. You get files sent to your iPad or phone that show the way. Buyers also can use the Go Expo tool on our website to plan their show minute by minute.

JM: To help buyers maximize their experience, FFANY introduced a trend gallery presentation in partnership with Fashion Snoops. It's a curated installation that features footwear styles selected by Fashion Snoops to represent the top trends for the season. We believe it's a key tool to assist retailers shopping the market.

LCO: We continue to make the show easier to shop for retailers, as well as offer [conveniences] such as complimentary [meals] and Wi-Fi service to help them stay efficient.

Are any new elements being introduced at the upcoming shows?

LG: For the first time, we will have a staggered schedule [across four days] since so many buyers are cross-shopping Magic's apparel and footwear shows. We expect a lot of apparel retailers to use that fourth and last day to shop FN Platform for footwear for their stores. We will debut a made-in-America program where we will highlight all the product that is made in the U.S., as well as a British Invasion pavilion in conjunction with the British Footwear Association.

DK: Our seminar series will continue with presentations by Lineapple, Materials Connexion, as well as a presentation on the state of global sourcing by Matt Priest, president of the Footwear Distributors & Retailers of America. In addition, our opening-night party will return with an Olympics theme to honor our international visitors.

KH: We're going to have a stand-up paddle tank for people to try [the sport]. There's a growing fly-fishing element at OR that's drawing more stores

and vendors, so we will have a fly-fishing casting area for the first time. We're also taking some space at the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, adjacent to the Salt Palace. There will be events going on there, [including] educational programs, film screenings from the industry and some celebratory stuff.

JM: To support exhibitors with brand promotion and awareness, we've introduced an updated sponsorship program, which includes moderately priced packages, as well as non-traditional place-

LG: We are constantly refining our strategy and looking for new ways to integrate social media into the FN Platform show experience. We do all of it, from Twitter feeds to Pinterest to our blogger program. We also continue to make enhancements to our Map Your Show digital service.

DK: Our online presence continues to expand. We use all direct means of communication to reach attendees and keep them updated [on everything going on at the show].

KH: We built our social media center last year so we could provide one-click access to the Twitter hashtag rollups, the Facebook posts and all the other social media that's flying at the show.

How is the role of trade shows changing?

LG: With everything moving so fast due to technology, it's become even more important to network and have that personal, face-to-face contact. Trade shows also are an ideal place for taking the pulse of the industry. You need to get out of your own world and see what's going on. We always encourage showgoers to spend time just walking the aisles and perusing the product to see what's new and to really get the flavor of a season.

KH: [More and more, trade shows] are your crystal ball to the future. They're a place to find information, inspiration and opportunity. You're going to see the new technology being applied to your business, and you [have an opportunity] to interact with the chief leaders in the market in a way that [gives] you a sense of where the business is headed.

JM: Brands and buyers need shows covering a wide cross section of the industry. The buyers are basically interested in one thing: the right fashion product at the right time, at the right price, and that will never change.

DK: Anyone attending a trade show needs focus. They need to go, do what they need to do and get back to their businesses. The days of the all-in-one, all-encompassing show are behind us. The industry has gone through tremendous consolidation in the past five years, and buyers and exhibitors can no longer just go to hand out business cards and shake hands. A trade show remains the most efficient manner to do business, and it's up to us as the provider to create the right environment for this to happen.

LCO: With the competition in the retail industry, it is very important that buyers stay on top of what is new and exciting, and [attending] trade shows is the only way to do that. For the most part, buyers are using the shows more wisely. Brands are looking to the shows to get their product in front of the retailers. And because the cost of traveling has skyrocketed, companies are finding it difficult to visit all their retail accounts, making shows more important, especially for new and smaller manufacturers.



Kenji Haroutunian

ment opportunities that will increase visibility and recognition among show attendees.

LCO: We have added space to accommodate the increasing number of vendors attending the show. One of the largest increases has been in the work-boot category, so we've created a dedicated new area called "The Work Zone."

What new digital and social media efforts are you undertaking?

JM: We unveiled a free FFANY Directory app during our June show earlier this month. It offers a digital version of our show guide, with instant links to manufacturers' websites and email addresses. [We see it] as an added benefit for retailers and a step toward further engagement between show producers, attendees and exhibitors.

LCO: We have engaged a social media company to manage our efforts. We are now live on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr.