

THE LAST WORD

THE SHOW MUST GO ON by DAVID ZRIKE



As president of the newly formed Tabletop Association – created in the spring to promote the New York Tabletop Show – I am often asked

about the viability of trade shows going forward. Our post-Covid world has changed so much. Although I have 39 years logged in the tabletop industry, I've never seen anything like what we're currently facing. Covid still lingers, the supply chain seems to be broken, and sales are slowing after faring well the past two years. Most trade shows weren't held for a couple of years and those that have returned are in a rebuilding stage. Many companies found their business explode the last two years without any face-to-face interaction and speculated that perhaps trade shows weren't necessary. What does this mean for the future of trade shows, which have always been the lifeblood of the industry?

In tabletop's heyday throughout the '80s and '90s when I worked for my family's business, The Zrike Company, we used to have 200+ appointments at the tabletop show over three days. No exaggeration. It was crazy. Not only were we busy with appointments, but the industry frequently gathered after hours thanks to multiple parties thrown by magazines, ad agencies, and vendors themselves. Over time, store closures and competing shows led to a dwindling of appointments, a new normal we got used to because trade shows remained critical for business. There were fewer appointments over the years, but, as I like to say, it was quality over quantity.

There are opportunities that happen at trade shows that would be hard to replicate doing business without them. For example, one tabletop show a few years back, we were meeting with a

buyer from a large chain who was buying very little. The chain wouldn't buy our number one brand because they thought it was too mass. We had just about given up. One day, the buyer stood in front of our display at 41 Madison and said, "I like this. I think I'll test it." That single moment resulted in tens of millions of dollars for the retailer, the brand, and our company.

Oftentimes, companies bring entire buying teams as well as management to trade shows which can greatly impact business in a variety of ways. At a recent show with that same retailer noted above, we had a 30-minute meeting with senior management where we discussed not only our successes but the challenges we've both been facing, and together came up with solutions and, ultimately, ways to grow our relationship. We now have someone in senior management who knows and understands us. Without a show and a showroom neither of these great things would have happened.

Sure we all got used to living in a Zoom world which has great advantages, but nothing can, or will, replace what an in-person meeting can accomplish. I feel strongly that both worlds can live together. We've gotten to know our buyers very well through Zoom. In fact, in many cases we also met their children, their spouses, and their pets! On a recent call, a pretty intense conversation was afoot when all of a sudden a cat jumped up and stuck its face in the camera. We all had a good laugh and the tension was relieved. On another occasion we had online cocktails with our buyers, each trying to outdo the other with fancy wine and hors d'oeuvres.

Still, the sense of community and the sharing of ideas works best in person and in front of the product. It's vital for retailers to feel the pulse of the industry and to be present at trade shows with vendors and other retailers. Vendors and

There was once a strong camaraderie in this industry where companies worked together and execs supported each other. The newly formed Tabletop Association – which this issue's columnist heads – hopes to bring that kinship back.

retailers have faced similar and extraordinary circumstances the last few years. Relationships have never been more important as we navigate this new normal. Most folks seem to have a newfound appreciation for in-person meetings, and the overall sentiment at the last few trade shows was how glad people were to be back.

Although the decision to form a tabletop association came after 41 Madison's management team decided to no longer run the New York Tabletop Show, a tabletop association is a long overdue necessity. It's never been more important to share thoughts and ideas and to build and strengthen relationships in the industry we all love. The immediate goal of the Tabletop Association was to group together to keep the New York Tabletop Show going, but it is our intention that the Association be so much more than that. We're about to reach our first membership goal, but our ultimate hope is to have a majority of companies in the industry be part of the Association.

Since our immediate goal has been achieved, the show will go on. We look forward to hosting everyone at the New York Tabletop Show at 41 Madison, October 18-21.

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