

Where Has All the Equipment Gone?

Companies in search of the nuts-and-bolts machines are finding availability is scarce.



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THERE IS AN equipment shortage in the U.S. Hard as it is to believe, board shops are having a hard time finding equipment. After three years of near-shutdown status, PCB shops are back in the market, updating etchers, strippers, drills and so on, and are finding the going rough. Many suppliers have closed, others mere shells of their former selves. Not only are shops finding it difficult to choose equipment, they are at a

loss to find equipment to buy. And I'm not talking about new technology – there is plenty of that – but rather the basic “meat and potatoes” equipment that makes up the backbone of a board shop.

Another serious issue is that of repair and upgrade of existing equipment. After three years of trying to survive, of virtually holding equipment together with tape and wire, much of the equipment in American board shops is in need of repair and update, and there is no one to do it. Again, many service companies are out of business and in many instances there are no replacement parts to be had.

How can this be? What about the shops that closed? What about all that used equipment? Much of it is gone overseas. If you've been monitoring auctions and liquidations, you know most lots were pre-sold to shops in Asia, particularly China. It's said that in business, success is guaranteed for those who find a need and fill it. So a good 2004 is waiting for those equipment vendors who best fill that need ... and soon.

That leads me to that little trade show later this month. For the first time, IPC will combine its Expo and Apex shows. This means a fabricator will be able to go into one hall and, say, buy a new drill, then saunter over to another and sell boards to its favorite contract manufacturer. The idea for combining the shows came out of desperation, thanks to poor attendance and mounting financial losses. I am going to go out on a limb and predict that this will be the best-attended show in years. Things have turned, business is better, and companies need to get reeducated about what is available. They will go to touch and feel new equipment. They will go to develop and renew relationships. They will go with needs and dollars – a great combination. It will be a landmark event.

And what of the machines of the future – equipment that every shop would love to have, if they could afford it? No. 1 on my short list is laser direct imaging. At least 50 shops have LDI – and they love it! If I sold LDI, I would figure a way to offer a great financial package and sell a ton of them right now. The next technology that is heating up is

the direct legend equipment, although shops need to be convinced that this really works well (it does), and then they will start scooping them up. Finally, I predict that inspection equipment – AOI and final test – will be very hot.

Going to the show? Here are a few tips:

Plan ahead. Contact the people you want to meet.

Invite them to your booth. Set up firm appointments if you can. Secrecy doesn't pay: Let people know you are going. Send mail (print and email), faxes, announcements; whatever it takes make sure that everyone you do business with (or want to do business with) knows exactly where your booth will be.

Take the right people. This does not always mean the sales team. Consider bringing key inside staff. This is a great time for them to go face to face with the folks they deal with everyday but never meet.

Treat every lead like gold ... because it is. If you do not follow up, you waste the thousands of dollars you spent to be there. You exhibit to increase business, and the only way to do this is to follow up with those whom you meet.

Make your booth a welcoming one. For the attendee, approaching a booth can be downright intimidating. Don't scare them by staffing your booth with 15 people, decked in the same denim shirt with the same logo, talking to one another and ignoring the little folks with the big plastic bags who browse your literature. That little guy is your customer, the reason you are at the show. You can find out later what Harry shot on the course yesterday: pay attention to the customer!

Finally, if you hold a raffle or drawing for which attendees tender a business card in the hopes of winning something, make that “something” your product or service. Don't give away TVs or golf clubs: everyone wants those, and as such you will be inundated with cards. What you want are *qualified* leads. And in order to get qualified leads, you have to get cards from those who are sufficiently interested in what you do to try to get it at a great discount. These people are your potential customers, your true leads.

I have many more tips and ideas about having an effective trade show including, the top 10 reasons not to go and the top 15 reasons to go. Send me an email; I'm happy to share them. **PCD&M**

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