

A SLOT MACHINE HALF FULL: TRADE SHOWS STILL A SAFE BET FOR BUSINESS

By **Marcus Prater**

Another trade show down, one big one to go.

Upon the conclusion of the South American Gaming Suppliers Exhibition (SAGSE) at the Costa Salguero Convention Center in Buenos Aires in early October, the collective focus of the supplier side of the industry quickly shifted to the Global Gaming Expo (G2E) in Las Vegas.

Actually, that focus has been centered on G2E for quite some time, as the big slot machine companies in particular work frantically on the latest and greatest that will be on display at the Las Vegas Convention Center beginning Nov. 17. With the global business landscape altered and shaped by poor economic conditions virtually everywhere, the early buzz on G2E is split between talk of a smaller trade show floor, guessing what the visitor numbers will be and anticipating another spectacular display of innovation.

Those same discussions were taking place in Argentina's capital during SAGSE as well. And at every other trade show this year. People need something to talk about at these shows, right? Given the economic problems, asking, "Are you having a good show?" or "Did you have a good show?" is a product of real curiosity rather than just a throwaway question to a passing business acquaintance.

So, I will ask again, "Did you have a good show?" While I'm not in the business of directly selling machines, table equipment or gaming technology in general, the 80-plus members of the Association of Gaming Equipment Manufacturers (AGEM) are. Traveling around in my role as executive director of AGEM gives me a different perspective than when I was on the slot marketing side of the world. Thankfully, I no longer have to deal with customs problems, machine malfunctions and 14-hour setup days (though my respect for those who do has only grown).

As I sit here and try to summarize a busy trade show year, how each show was different and how each show compares in its own way to the monster that is G2E, it should be noted that I attended the International Gaming Exhibition in London in January; the National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA) show in Phoenix; the Canadian Gaming Summit in Windsor in April; the Southern Gaming Summit in Biloxi in May; G2E Asia in Macau in June; and SAGSE in October. There are many I missed, but overall I experienced a nice cross-section of global gaming business activity.

After a good deal of thought on how to summarize two weeks worth of activity spread across 10 months in four countries during the worst economic environment in our lifetime, I surprised myself by coming up with ... optimism. I believe it's a simple combination of the energy of our industry on top of enough money changing hands to motivate everyone.

I think back about the conversations that took place on all of these trade show floors and don't recall a single one that included something

along the lines of "Yuck, business sucks." Most have remained upbeat during these tough times and choose to look at the slot machine as half full. And there are others who truly have a reason to be upbeat because they're selling a ton of slot machines and other gaming supplies—and making a lot of money! Yes, there is good business to be found out there, and trade shows are one good way to find it.

Despite the regular (and true) outcry that there are too many shows, the quality ones still remain the best way to expose goods and services to the largest possible buying audience in the shortest period of time. SAGSE was bustling at times, and the odd show hours of 2:30–8:30 p.m. reflected the daily schedule for those wacky Argentineans, including a steak-and-red-wine dinner starting at 11 p.m. and clubbing until dawn. The show began with an enthralling speech by Frank J. Fahrenkopf Jr., president and CEO of the American Gaming Association (AGA), which, like AGEM, announced an official partnership with SAGSE in the months leading up to the show.

All of the top-tier shows this year have had a good vibe to them. London is always a good way to start the year, as long as you're willing to spend the money. NIGA was in Phoenix this year and drew a good crowd. Business in Canada remains good, and Casino Windsor was a good venue. Biloxi is always one of my favorites, though the business climate in general was not the greatest. Macau is always interesting to see 12 months later. And finally, SAGSE, where I saw Buenos Aires in a new light.

And now here we are at G2E, the big boy. The floor will be smaller but the core will not be. The big slot and table companies will flood the floor with the usual array of genius and creativity that helps drive the global gaming industry forward. Vegas will be alive with gaming executives from all four corners of the globe. Suppliers will be plotting strategy for the coming year with their entire global teams. AGEM will once again host the invitation-only industry party, presented at the Hard Rock as the "Appreciation Celebration" thank-you to customers and sponsored by Aristocrat, Bally, IGT and WMS. In all, G2E will be its usual monster self. And if optimism could be found all along the trade show road over the past 10 months, then you can bet the crowd gathered at the finish line in Vegas will be especially excited come Nov. 17.

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