

Suite surrender

Many distribs return to the floor to improve customer relations

By STUART LEVINE

For the NATPE folks, call it suite redemption.

After a couple of years of watching the major distributors bolt the convention floor at the confab for hotel suites, they're seeing many come back.

After Sony made the decision nearly a year ago to return to the floor, several others have followed. MGM, Universal, NBC, Carsey Werner and King World will all have booths. Twentieth, Paramount, Disney and Warner Bros. will have suites at the Venetian.

"Being in the suites was kind of a hollow, quiet experience," says John Weiser, exec VP at Sony Pictures Television, of last year's confab. "You're in a hotel room but you might as well be in an office. Being on the floor is much easier for our clients to get to us. Last year people complained and we need to service our customers."

Logistics-wise, the 2003 edition of NATPE, held in New Orleans, was a mess. Buyers had to travel around the city if they wanted to meet with most of the

WHERE THEY ARE

Company	Booth #
Carsey Werner	850
CBS	1846
King World	1846
MGM	842
NBC	845
Sony	646
Universal	2235
Company	Venetian suite
Disney	3131
Paramount	3209
Tribune	3142
Twentieth	3122
Warner Bros.	3322

big companies, while the smaller sellers were holed up in the Morial Convention Center. Paying for taxis and waiting for elevators was commonplace.

NATPE prexy Rick Feldman looks back at the 2003 gathering as one he'd like to forget.

"To be honest, it wasn't the suites that were the controver-

sy, it was the fact that New Orleans was a dysfunctional experience," he explains.

Following the experience in the Big Easy, Feldman and his NATPE execs did extensive research — over 600 interviews — with both buyers and sellers as to how the org could improve its annual event.

Many said having the exhibitors in one place would be the best place to begin.

"I used a lot of that info to get guys back on the floor,"

Feldman says. "Having the sellers accessible was a big deal to the buyers. The other side of it, though, is that we're a non-profit. We can't tell Dick Robertson what to do."

Robertson, Warner Bros. domestic TV president, led the charge in 1991 toward the suites, telling NATPE his firm wanted to leave the floor.

His reasons were twofold:

■ The syndie biz, once a huge moneymaker, was in a downward spiral. Skeins that were once launched following NATPE were now being cleared 12 months a year, and Robertson felt NATPE was losing its significance.

■ The cost of the booths was huge.

Nick Orfanopoulos, NATPE's senior VP of conference operations and sales, estimated the big booths each cost about \$1 million, which included food, security, building up and tearing down, among other things. Needless to say, the price of doing business was getting out of hand.

Weiser also recalls the days when nobody thought twice

about bringing in a Wolfgang Puck or an Emeril Lagasse to provide gourmet meals at a booth.

"Those booths used to be so plush, but those days are gone. They were reflective of the financial times," Weiser says. "We ain't flying in Wolfie to cook salmon pizzas anymore. The budget crunch came through, and now we're in a growth stage."

Orfanopoulos, experienced in convention setups, says NATPE is one of the least expensive trade shows. While prices vary for floor space, most fall in the \$14-\$18 range per square foot, which is affordable for the smaller and medium-sized companies that want to attend.



VEGAS HOT SPOT: The Venetian Hotel, which connects to the Sands Expo Center, will be where NATPE attendees gather.

At least they'll be there.

Feldman and predecessor Bruce Johansen were quick to realize that in order to keep NATPE relevant, the participants — both buyers and sellers — had to have a central place to socialize (an important aspect of the confab, according to Feldman) and do business.

In the interviews that were used to help right the ship, Feldman felt the wrath of many buyers. He did his best to explain, however, that it wasn't NATPE that created the logistical nightmares.

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Suite redemption as floor heats up

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"When these things happen, everyone gets mad at NATPE, but it's never NATPE that causes the show to be split up," Feldman says. "Rather, it's the decisions made by the various companies."

And NATPE execs are quick to point out that while some distribs will set up shop in suites at the Venetian Hotel, at least everyone will be under one roof: The Sands Expo Center is adjacent to the Venetian.

With the syndie biz having its share of hits that look to hang around a while — "Dr. Phil," "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" — many look toward NATPE 2004 as a possible renaissance. After last year's debacle, it seems the only place to go is up.

"We're fans," says Sony's Weiser. "We like getting together as an industry. Clearly, NATPE has taken the toughest hit a convention can take, but this year it feels like there's a lot of momentum."