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Even the displays got into the act when it came to safety precautions.

Atlanta Market continues to rebound

Buyers and sellers returned for the January show eager to buy

Warren Shoulberg // Contributing Editor // January 20, 2021



Last week's Atlanta Gift and Home Market here, the second major trade show of the new year, continued a pattern of the slow but steady return of physical markets to the industry.

While attendance probably hovered around the 50% mark, exhibitors working the show reported retailers were coming off strong holiday seasons and needed goods for spring and throughout the rest of the year. Most exhibitors said they came into the show week with modest expectations that had been surprisingly exceeded in many cases.

But clearly the business of shows remains a work in progress as evidenced by activity in the halls of AmericasMart:

- Health and safety precautions were front and center with mask wearing, temperature checks and hand sanitizer stations far more prevalent than tote bags, product demos and mimosa bars.

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Masks were very much the standard wardrobe for everyone working the Atlanta gift and home show last week.

- Buying activity, as it was in Dallas, was strongest in stay-at-home product categories like home entertaining, outdoor, kitchenware and the ever-ubiquitous candle business.
- Buyers and sellers were continuing to reinvent the show process with video selling sessions, electronic order taking and more spaced out displays and showroom layouts.
- Attendance was focused on the independent specialty retailer category as most larger companies still have business travel bans preventing their employees from attending trade shows.

"Our customers are ready, willing and able to shop, and we're pleased to see them here," said Peter Schauben, principle in the big regional sales agency Appelman-Schauben. He said the retailers attending market reported better than expected and even excellent year-end results, putting them in positions to aggressively buy new merchandise.



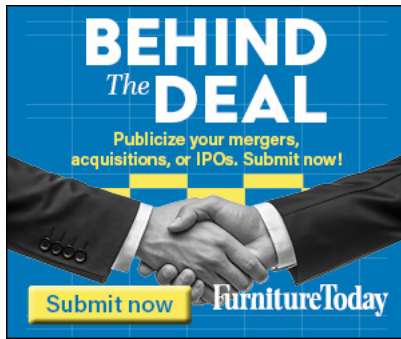
He added that providing an atmosphere where customers felt safe was a key for attracting market attendees and that, as always, his showroom presentation needed to be creative and strong to create buying opportunities.

"So far, things are better than expected," Jesse James, president of multi-line sales agency Aesthetic Movement, said on the third day of the show last week. "We really weren't sure what we were in for based on last year," and like many showrooms he brought in less staff than previous years to man the space. At some showrooms, companies said they needed more sales help to handle order writing, a pleasant surprise.

"Our show expectations were moderate," said Andy Bjork, chief sales officer for Ivystone, which represents a large number of gift and home lines. "Our own expectation was to run a safe show," and he said the agency was doing that with new measures and processes including more use of video selling. "It's trial and error."

Bjork said buying activity was strong among those attending the show, which were mostly independents. James of Aesthetic Movement, like Bjork and others, pointed to "at-home" products like kitchen, cooking and bread baking as big movers and said outdoor merchandise was also starting to sell more in anticipation of warmer weather ahead.

Attendance was stronger than last summer though still only at about the 50% level compared to historical levels.



For most at AmericasMart it still felt different but less different than at its last market this past August. “We’re on a journey back, and this was a giant step back on that road,” said Bob Maricich, CEO of International Market Centers, owners and operators of the market. “I’d say in gift and furnishings we’re half way back.”

Even as IMC is developing its own virtual ordering platform under the Juniper brand scheduled to have its launch this spring, Maricich said the need for physical markets has not diminished and those attending the Atlanta show realized that. “Both buyers and sellers are realistic about where we are now but with the enhanced safety measures we’ve put in place there’s a real sense of optimism now.”

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