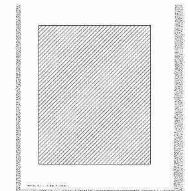
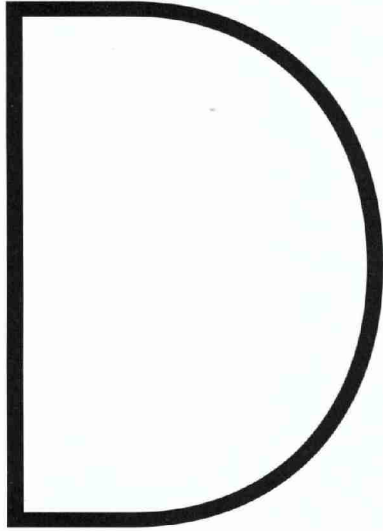


## **ROOM FOR RECOVERY**

AFTER RIDING OUT  
A ROCKY RECESSION,  
THE TRADE SHOW  
INDUSTRY IS  
EDGING OUT OF  
SURVIVAL MODE  
AS IT PREPARES  
TO WOO BUYERS  
WITH **BIGGER AND  
BETTER SHOWS**  
IN 2011. BY AUDREY  
GOODSON





Desperate times call for desperate measures, and when the economy sputtered in 2009, even the usually upbeat children's show industry adopted the belt-tightening and soul-searching measures necessary to survive. As a result, managers and showroom reps are proud to point out that the creative enticements added to their lineups in the last few years led to more convenient, comfortable and exciting shows in 2010. And it seems like buyers and exhibitors are taking note.

"Early on, we quickly realized that times were changing and it may not be business as usual," explained Sandra Martinez, owner of Los Angeles-based In Play Showroom and co-head of the Kids on 6 children's rep group at the California Market Center. "So we sat down and strategized different ways to increase business, help our accounts and do what we could to remain steady in 2010. I am happy to announce we have done just that and a little more."

Kids on 6 isn't the only trade group reporting a notable increase in traffic this year. "In August we had an increase of 20 percent over 2009," said Denise Raeside, show manager for KIDShow in Las Vegas. "In fact, 2010 was our best year ever," she added. Buyers also welcomed new shows like Playtime New York—the U.S. edition of the Paris- and Tokyo-based children's, juniors and maternity show—as well as Kidz at Stylemax, a new children's section added to the Chicago Stylemax women's apparel show.

The reason behind the sudden growth in the children's trade show world? The slowly recovering economy undoubtedly played a part, as buyers who decreased buying in 2009 were finally ready to beef up their streamlined inventories. "People are working with more manageable, realistic inventory levels, but at some point people will start taking chances and building those inventory levels back because they will see an opportunity to make more money," noted Robbin Wells, executive vice president of leasing for the Dallas Market Center. Martinez agreed, noting that buyers at recent shows seemed more confident. "I don't know that business has turned around to pre-2009 levels, but retailers seem to have a better grip on what they need to do to survive."

Retailers aren't the only group with a handle on weathering tough times. Trade show managers and staff have upped the ante in recent

years with loads of perks—such as free lunches, parking and giveaways—meant to entice budget-minded buyers and exhibitors to attend. "When there's a crisis, you have to find a solution," explained Sébastien de Hutten, director of Playtime. "What's a solution? Offer things other people aren't offering. We're all going one level up." For many trade shows, that meant expanding websites, changing dates or adding an even greater product mix—doing whatever is necessary to maximize convenience for cautious buyers. With their efforts paying off in 2010, trade show managers promise to continue to create compelling shows that will please retailers, reps and exhibitors in 2011. Here are a few key changes for the upcoming year.

## Keep It Easy

In the era of online buying, making shows convenient and simple to navigate is essential to attracting busy retailers. And nowadays that means developing and maintaining websites that allow buyers to prepare pre-show. "Young professionals create a list of those exhibitors they want to visit prior to the event, making pre-show marketing a major factor in gaining awareness of the company's products," confirmed Cathy Breden, executive director of the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (see the "Bridging the Gap" sidebar for more tips on appealing to young trade show attendees).

Playtime's website, for example, allows users to search its database of exhibitors by category, and includes four product images for each brand, which companies can change at any time of the year. "Those lists are extremely consulted by buyers, because it's easy to scout collections you're interested in," de Hutten noted. Also diving into the digital age is Kids on 6, which will soon be launching a new website, updated Facebook page, and expanded blogging and social media efforts. "The new website is geared toward buyers that need quick access to our Kids on 6 showrooms and the brands we carry," explained Martinez. "The showrooms will be listed with full contact information and will have direct links to their websites, and buyers will be able to look up information and photos by showroom or by brand." The site will also include shopping, travel and entertainment tips for downtown Los Angeles, giving attendees all of the necessary information at the click of a mouse.

While helping retailers prep for a show is increasingly important, ensuring attendees feel comfortable while browsing the stalls is still key to driving attendance—whether that means selecting an easy-to-reach location, forking out freebies or directing visitors through well-designed halls. "We now have greeters on our floor to guide buyers in the right direction and to get them set up with lunch vouchers, free parking, directories, raffle info and so forth," Martinez noted. "Buyers want to get as much work done in as little time as possible and they want to stay within their budgeted expenses." Keeping convenience in mind, de Hutten reports that Playtime has found success with its open, airy format that links booths, allowing visitors to wander from one exhibitor to another and making it less intimidating for retailers to check out new and unfamiliar brands. Next year, the show plans to expand the width of the booths, so buyers can get a better glimpse of collections as they browse.

## BRIDGING THE GAP

IN TODAY'S MARKET, there's no denying the importance of appealing to a younger, web-savvy generation of retailers, who might be more likely to order online rather than attend a trade show.

"For the first time in history, there are four age groups in the workplace," said Cathy Breden, executive director of the Center for Exhibition Industry Research. "Exhibitors need to consider the generational differences of these age groups and be able to communicate effectively with each."

Here, Breden provides a few tips for exhibiting companies looking to hook younger buyers, based on the Center's study of 1,200 trade show attendees under the age of 39:

**Go Digital:** "Young professionals are a mobile generation, and are comfortable with technology and communicating with each other through smart phones and social media. Exhibitors should create a presence to showcase the company or product on social media sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook."

**Design Wisely:** "Large, elaborate exhibit booths do not necessarily mean that those in small booths will not be successful. It is all about engagement. Create an engaging experience for not just young people, but for anyone who stops by the booth. Draw attendees in and make them feel welcome."

**Target Your Audience:** "Request demographic information from the show organizer, including age, areas of experience and interest, decision-making authority, etc. Target messages based on your goals for the exhibition, and consider creating a contest or an incentive for those key targets to visit your booth." (Breden noted that 43 percent of young trade show attendees said product demonstrations significantly impacted the memorability of a booth.)

**Keep an Open Mind:** "At the end of the day, the formula is in many ways just to use common sense: Treating people as equals and having a positive outlook and disposition will go a long way toward creating a positive perception."

### Keep It Interesting

One of the biggest developments in the children's market in recent years is the diversity of products offered at specialty retailers and boutiques—and as a result, at shows. "When you look at stores nowadays, they offer clothes, shoes, accessories, toys and gifts," de Hutten said, noting that his show is hoping to hook buyers seeking one-stop shopping by offering items for moms, kids and teens.

Fittingly, retailers looking to add new categories will have many options in 2011. The Children's World section of Atlanta's AmericasMart debuted a new children's shoe co-op in October, reported Tara King, senior manager of media relations, and it will showcase children's Christmas products during the January 2011 Atlanta International Gift & Home Furnishings Market. In Chicago, buyers who previously visited the Merchandise Mart's permanent apparel showrooms now have the option of attending the Kidz at **Stylemax** section within the women's wear market. "It was hard before when buyers were in the showroom because we didn't have the means to attract new companies, but now there's a lot of new blood," explained Susan McCullough, senior vice president of apparel at Merchandise Mart Properties Inc. "Women's lines may have a children, infant or gift corner. There's more crossover than there has been."

Exploring the gift arena seemed to be the most popular choice for many buyers, who were looking to bolster sales with small,

inexpensive items that might prove more tempting to cash-strapped shoppers. The emergence of the kids' gift market was perfectly illustrated by the new Baby & Child section at the New York International Gift Fair in August, but many trade show managers reported a boost in brands selling gift items at their shows as well. In fact, the popularity of the gift market has prompted the Dallas Market Center to move the dates for KidsWorld to June 23-26, 2011, so that the children's apparel dates would coincide with the Total Home & Gift Market rather than their traditional alignment with the Apparel Market.

In addition to a breadth of products, retailers are also looking for a breadth of services, according to de Hutten. "They come here to buy new collections, but they also come to discover new trends and be a little intellectually stimulated," he explained, pointing to the popularity of the artist installations spread throughout Playtime. Robbins reported that the Dallas retail advisory board was hearing the same thing from its buyers, but on a more philanthropic note. "What we felt on the apparel side is that all the talk is about giving back," Robbins said, adding that in response the group has launched a program called the Next Big Give. Beginning in March, the showroom will honor two retailers who have created unique ways to help their communities—hopefully inspiring attendees to launch efforts in their own shops. "Stores have long come to market looking for display and marketing ideas," Robbins added, "and I think we're all looking for ways to give back right now."

### Keep It Convenient

Listening to attendees and selecting convenient show dates and spaces is also key to keeping buyers coming back year after year, said Stanley Kaye, ENK Children's Club director. "Years ago, we might have just picked dates based on available dates in the facility. Now we're trying to get into more focus groups and individual conversations with stores to get a better idea of what their needs are, to see how that affects the timing of and the merchandising of the show." That's why Children's Club is moving its January edition to later in the month, to Jan. 23-25, 2011. "Our January show is the last show for retailers to buy spring/summer collections," he noted. "Coming on the heels of the holiday period, stores felt they needed a little breather. They wanted to come, but with a better handle on what they needed."

Pleasing attendees also means working within the constraints of a crowded trade show calendar, said Larry Schur, president of the ABC Kids Expo, which is moving to Louisville, Ky., in September, after eight years in Las Vegas. Unable to book a block of convenient dates in Las Vegas, the show's execs began searching for a new expo space, and were impressed by Louisville's capacity. "This convention center is a million and a half square feet," Schur noted. "It's got quite a bit of room for growth."

And allowing for room to grow may be a smart bet, as the cautious consensus is that the children's market may finally regain its footing next year, Schur reported. "The feeling from trade show managers is that things are really going to start to turn around in the third quarter of 2011." •