

Industry Trade Shows: The debate

Established by BIGGA, the IOG and AEA, under the independent Chairmanship of David Gwyther of the Horticultural Trades Association, the Grounds and Turf Care Industry Forum set out to look into not only the current issues facing industry trade shows but also into how the industry could collaborate on wider issues. Following an extensive review of trade events in the sector – specifically BTME and IOG SALTEX – the Forum issued a statement recently reinforcing the view that there are significant differences between the two events and that they are not directly comparable. Market forces will continue to dictate the demand and make up of these types of event. David Gwyther provides some background to the Forum and its actions

1. What was the purpose of the Forum and why was it established?

It was originally established to review the most cost-effective routes for delivering trade shows to the sports turf sector, following questioning from within the industry as to whether running separate shows was the best way forward. I was very impressed at the integrity and openness of this approach, and the commitment that BIGGA, IOG and AEA brought to the process. So I was not surprised that the positive discussions we had on shows led on, in due course, to agreement to work together on a number of other areas.

2. Did the Forum evolve or change during the process?

The Group focussed firmly on the shows' issue initially, with a series of regular meetings backed by objective data analysis to inform them. This analysis had to be done independently and confidentially of course, not least because of the commercially sensitive nature of the data to both IOG and BIGGA. I am pleased that the composition of the forum continues to evolve positively, with the inclusion of BAGMA at our last meeting. It may be that other relevant bodies or individuals are brought on board over time.

3. You were appointed as independent Chairman with no commercial/membership interests in either show? What is your background?

I've been Director General of the Horticultural Trades Association (HTA) for many years. It's a large trade association, founded in 1899 and with a current turnover of around £27 million, so we have plenty of resources. They include political lobbying, training, and market research, but we're particu-

larly good at running events and have successfully established the National Plant Show recently following the demise of the old style GLEE show. So we've plenty of expertise to analyse the show scene and good experience of successfully evolving it.

4. How did you decide on what information you needed to start the process? What/whose data was analysed? Are you comfortable that the data presented to you was sufficient to enable the Forum to arrive at justifiable conclusions?

Because of our experience of these situations, we knew we needed robust visitor and exhibitor data from the existing shows. This data existed, but had never before been compared and analysed. We were therefore in a unique position of being able to do this – and it was therefore relatively easy to see a way forward for the immediate future. Clearly, though, performance output for the shows will need to be analysed in the future, and perhaps more targeted follow up research with exhibitors and visitors done, so that the situation is kept under constant review. This is a "work in progress" situation, not a final solution.

5. What was the process which resulted in the Forum reaching the conclusions which were announced last month?

As I said before, the initial focus of the forum's work was on the immediate future of the existing spread of shows. With the resolution of this, we were able to expand discussions to include new topics where common ground exists. These include training, policy lobbying, and market research, as well as bringing informed debate to

issues like pesticide use. However, the issue of the future composition of trade shows will be kept under review, to make sure that sensible responses to market forces are not missed.

6. How vital was it that EVERY aspect of the industry was considered?

Our focus has been very much on shows and methods of bringing suppliers and potential customers together. Other aspects of the industry can, though, now be considered by the Group not least to share best practice and ensure the most cost-efficient delivery of initiatives is developed on behalf of members. We're all very much focussed on serving the evolving needs of members, not maintaining a status quo.

7. Is the Forum adopting an open door policy going forwards?

Indeed – though I think membership has to be restricted to a small number of robust organisations who can properly represent their members' interests objectively. This obviously means that those members' views will come to the table and be properly considered. We'll also need to make sure that commercial sensitivities are handled confidentially and with care.

8. How important is it – to exhibitors as well as visitors – that trade shows continue to evolve and proactively adapt to market forces?

Absolutely fundamental. The forum was set up to ensure that market forces were properly taken into account in considering how best trade shows should evolve. There is total commitment to a process of constant review, and not seeking one off quick fixes.

