





The Really Big Show!

By Tim Van Milligan

This past week marked the International Model and Hobby Convention in Chicago. For those of us in the model rocket business, this is the "big show." The reason we attend is to impress the hobby stores into carrying our products. Like any humans, the store owners like to physically touch and feel each new item. They examine it closely. They poke and they prod. And they look at the type of package it is sold in. In the end, if they like the item, they'll place an order for it. So when you see our products in your local hobby shop, you'll know it has passed an important quality assurance test.

Also like hobbyist, retailers want to see "new" items. The hobby industry is very competitive, and last year's item is this year's dog. "Pokemon" who? This year it is "Harry Potter" that is the hot item. The store with the latest items will often get more sales -- which gradually diminishes as other stores start stocking the item too. The retailers want it first, and as fast as possible. Because of this hype, the manufacturers often make new product announcements at this convention.

The physical size of this convention is really huge. The convention hall covers an area greater than nine football fields. And pretty much every square inch of that is filled. Not only do rocket companies attend, but other hobbies show up too. They include: model trains, RC cars, RC planes, RC boats, airplane motors, electronic gizmos, transmitters, receivers, servos, plastic models, scenery for trains, decals, adhesives, balsa and plastic shapes, die-cast cars, roll-playing games, paints, and lots of tools.

For the most part, these are traditional hobbies as I think of them. The show doesn't include what I call the "fluff and feather" crafts. So it is dominated by "men's hobbies."

In fact, model rocketry is one of the smallest product areas represented. This year, there were six rocketry companies

attending: Apogee Components, Aerotech, PML, Quest, Estes, and Fun Craft (Holverson Design). But there is a lot of cross-over products that have applications to rocketry.

If you don't get overwhelmed, it is possible to walk down each aisle and get a good sense of the latest advances in all hobbies. But it is hard to take it all in. Especially, how does this all relate to model rocketry. In my own way, I could see how many other hobbies have an impact on rocketry. For example, a new type of paint or adhesive could work wonders for rocketeers.

For me as a manufacturer, the other big reason to attend this show is to make contacts with other non-rocketry manufacturers. You can find out all sorts of things that others in the industry are hesitant to reveal. Things like: where to buy cheaper materials, and which publications get the best results for the advertising dollar.

On the weekends, they open up the exhibit hall to consumers. For the hobby store owner and exhibitors, this is both frustrating and enlightening. The frustrating part is that the hoards of people walking around makes it difficult for the hobby store representative to visit or see each booth. But on the other hand, if there is a big crowd always around a particular exhibit, that indicates the item he's selling may be a really hot product that year.

For the consumer attending all the exhibits, there is a ton of information to gather. People usually end up with both arms hanging down to the floor with gobs of pamphlets. Plus, there are other goodies to pick up too: catalogs, free samples, technical literature, and the make-and-take booths; where you can get build rockets and take them home with you.

Overall, I would highly recommend that you attend if you get the chance. It is well worth it. Just be prepared for a lot of walking and heavy lifting of all the stuff you'll bring home with you.



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