A week before The NAMM Show, Joe Lamond, the organization’s president and CEO, announced that pre-registration numbers were down 1 percent from last year’s meeting — a show with record-breaking attendance. Which raised the question: With a recession in effect, how many of those people would actually show up?

Quite a few, it turned out.

The 2009 NAMM convention, held from Jan. 15–18 at the Anaheim Convention Center in Anaheim, Calif., ended with final attendance of 85,799 registrants, a 3-percent drop from last year. It also attracted 1,505 exhibitors. When the doors opened on Thursday morning, the show floor bustled, and that energy continued through Saturday afternoon. Many exhibitors noted a severe slowdown in traffic on Sunday, the last day of the show, but still reported strong overall attendance.

NAMM draws surprisingly robust attendance despite the recession

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CHARGING AHEAD

“I thought it was worth the expenditure, the time, the effort, the sweat, the tears — I’m sure there was some blood in there, too,” said Mike Belitz, CEO of Ultimate Support Systems, with a laugh.

First-time exhibitor DBZ Guitars, led by guitar industry veteran Dean Zelinsky, mentioned visiting with quality attendees. “It’s still Friday, but we’ve been busy,” he said halfway through the show. “And more importantly, we’ve seen very important attendees. It seems the international community came out in droves — Germany, the U.K., Australia, South America.”

Music retailers seeking ways to survive in the tough market hit the NAMM University sessions in full force. The NAMM U. Breakfast Sessions boasted an 11.4-percent increase in total attendance from last year.

“Our members once again demonstrated their determination and persistence as the best and brightest from around the world gathered to experience four days of new products, NAMM University...”
courses, networking and great live music,” Lamond said.

Some exhibitors scaled back to take a more cautious approach to the show. Yamaha held off on its annual dealer concert, opting instead to host a jam-packed press conference with Alicia Keys to introduce its new AvantGrand digital piano. Press conferences also quieted down by the third day of the show. Still, there were some product innovations, including Yamaha’s AvantGrand and Roland’s new V-Piano.

“I thought that in light of the current economic doom and gloom portrayed by the media that The NAMM Show was remarkably upbeat, particularly the school music sector,” said George Quinlan, president of Quinlan & Fabish in Burr Ridge, Ill. “Times like this make the survivors stronger.”

**AMPED UP**

Crowds filled the aisles around Paul Reed Smith’s tented booth on the second day of the show. Famous axe-wielders, such as Adrian Belew and Mark Tremonti, stood alongside Smith himself, but the crowd wasn’t there for celebrity sightings. They wanted to be
the first to glimpse PRS's new tube amps and acoustic guitars. Designed in collaboration with amp builder Doug Sewell, PRS's tube amps pay homage to classic American and British sounds. Including the Dallas, Blue Sierra and Original Sewell models, they're decidedly high-end pieces, with MSRP's beginning around $3,500.

"Doug Sewell has developed what I think is an extraordinary-sounding amplifier, and it's what I am currently using," Smith said. "The move isn't so much about diversifying into a new segment as it is about offering musicians a beautifully-sounding amp with a different kind of sound."

The acoustics, the Angelus Cutaway and Tonare Grand models, are also boutique items, with MSRPs hovering around $5,300. German spruce tops and rare Peruvian mahogany necks come standard.

PRS wasn't the only company to expand into new territory at NAMM. Audio and recording supplier TC Electronic showed its first bass amplifier offering with the RebelHead450 head (MSRP: $1,395), RebelStack cabinets...
and RebelControl (MSRP: $195). Each piece combines to form a versatile bass rig.

“When we started looking at combining our technologies in processing, amplification and speakers into instrument amplification, bass amps seemed a natural fit,” said John Maier, CEO of TC Electronic. “It’s also a smaller, more focused market and customer base that we felt we could get our arms around and really create something new.”

Guitar and bass amps, in fact, proved to be the focus of several major NAMM events. Marshall kicked off the show with a meeting dubbed “the loudest breakfast of your life.” There, Slayer’s Kerry King and Whitesnake’s Doug Aldrich demoed the company’s new MG4 series amplifiers. These solid-state amps represent Marshall’s entry-level and feature seven new combos and a 100-watt head. They range in power from 10–100 watts.

Soon after Marshall’s meeting, Markbass hosted a press conference at its booth to launch several new wares. Among them was the MoMark Tester bass amp system. It lets players choose their power amp and pre-amp, EQ, and master modules, along with a range of other options.
Peavey’s JSX 50 guitar amp head served as a centerpiece of the company’s booth. A collaboration with guitarist Joe Satriani, the head has been created to be the “definitive 50-watt amplifier,” according to Jim Beaugez, Peavey’s communications manager. “Joe loves the old, 50-watt amps from the ’60s, but his problem with them is that they’re just not very personal. So a modern player who’s doing three sets a night playing a wide variety of music needs something that allows them to get more sounds.”

This is achieved with an array of gain possibilities, a boost switch on the crunch channel and a six-way attack selector that adjusts the bass response. The JSX 50 has an MSRP of $1,499.

SOFTWARE EVOLUTION

Large crowds also gathered around laptops and flat-screen TVs in Hall A to check out the latest software innovations from audio, recording and DJ suppliers. Ableton was at the forefront with its Live 8 software. Live 8 enables remote collaboration via the Web with a special feature that streamlines the sharing process.
more than 50 Waves TDM plug-ins compatible for live environments.

Trinity Audio Group’s Indamixx portable studio exemplified the integration of computers and music. It’s a hand-held, mini laptop hardware/software music making solution under $500.

“Mobile music making is the future,” said Trinity Audio Group’s Creative Director Ronald Stewart. “We already see this making headway in the market.”

Several audio hardware suppliers aimed to help sound engineers adapt to new Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations that will reduce white space for pro audio use. AKG offered a host of new products that comply with FCC regulations, including the WMS40 Pro wireless system and the System Architect HUB 4000 Q plug-in with one-click setup.

Sabine also expanded the range of its DTV/license-free wireless microphone systems. The new SWM 6000 can use 34 simultaneous channels and, combined with Sabine’s SWM 7000 wireless system, can reach 104 simultaneous channels.

“There will be many changes in how we, as an industry, use wireless communications systems with the upcoming DTV switch-over,” said Joe Nguyen, director of sales for Sabine. “Sabine is proud to offer another wireless solution that will not be affected by the DTV switch-over.”

Several audio companies have branched out to appeal to a wider consumer base. Tascam’s DR-100 portable recorder includes a wireless remote control and audio editing features, while Olympus introduced new wind jammer accessories for its $399 Linear PCM recorder. Edirol by Roland’s R-09 HR includes pyro Audio Creator LE software from Cakewalk for easy audio-file editing.

Samson improved on the Zoom H4 with the Zoom H4n. With a $349 street price, it records four channels simultaneously. Samson execs also announced the Zoom Q3 Quick Cam Recorder, which records audio and video, further connecting audio products to a larger consumer base.

**FIGHTING THE STORM**

Drum manufacturers at NAMM were not immune to the economic realities of shrinking demand. At the Percussion Marketing Council’s meeting on the third day of the show, attendees discussed the issue of money drying up for school music programs that turn students into musicians. Still, it didn’t keep percussion suppliers from releasing new products or stifle their awareness of where markets are growing.

Larry Nelson, product manager for Sonor Drums, said he has noticed more drummers going to four-piece kits, as opposed to five-piece kits. While tight pocketbooks may be a contributing factor, he said the trend may have more to do with drummers wanting to play in the pocket. “The four-piece sets are less busy, so drummers don’t have to carry around as much,” Nelson said. “This makes for a deeper groove.”

Pearl also emphasized a four-piece configuration with its Forum Ready-Set-Go! package. Other companies focused on five-piece kits as higher-end items. Drum Workshop’s Collector’s series, in particular, not only features the larger number of drums but also an array of pristine finishes, such as olive ash and Macassar ebony.

Meanwhile, technological advances amped up virtual percussive products, such as Roland’s DT-HD1 Drum Tutor. This software connects a laptop to a small electronic drum set, and its notation guides users toward making the right hits.

Many drum companies at NAMM also looked to the international market, or at least globally minded players, for their new products. Toca Percussion unveiled West African Freestyle djembes in antique gold and silver. Chalo Eduardo, Remo’s international products manager, demonstrated the company’s new line of Middle Eastern doumbeks, South Indian Kanjira drums and Caribbean-inspired Mondo Tunable Nesting hand drums.

“We’re manufacturing in the United States but making products for the world,” Eduardo said.

Some companies went for more retro looks and sounds. Ludwig is celebrating its centennial this year with Liverpool 4, a kit modeled after the one used by Ringo Starr at the height of Beatlemania. Timbales player Ralph Irizarry has also signed on with Tycoon Percussion for a signature line, which he said is built to recapture the feeling of Tito Puente playing mambo in clubs 60 years ago. He
added that this line can cut through in large, amplified venues.

INNOVATIONS BUILT TO SELL

Last year’s rocky economic finale did little to delay the release of some of this century’s most innovative piano products. Piano and keyboard industry stalwarts used NAMM to pair breakthrough products with imaginative marketing strategies to help retailers get the items to new audiences in the coming year.

Yamaha introduced the AvantGrand digital piano at the beginning of the show and its Customer-Centric Yamaha program the following day. The AvantGrand, designed with multi-channel speakers and a soundboard resonator, uses the Tactile Response System to emulate digitally not only the sound but also the physical experience of playing a high-end acoustic piano.

The company’s new sales programs also aimed to help dealers tap into a younger generation of online multitaskers. “Sixty-seven percent [of consumers] buying an item are going online to find information about that item,” said Tom Sumner, Yamaha Corp. of America’s senior vice president.

In response, a recent clickthrough e-mail campaign, part of the new program, recorded

the locations of consumers who browsed products on Yamaha’s Web site, which will be passed on to dealers as new leads. The company will also begin offering enhanced sales guides for its new products online.

Roland debuted the VPiano, the most lavish of this year’s piano and keyboard offerings. The company’s founder Ikutaro Kakehashi introduced the instrument in the spirit of President Obama’s election. “For 100 years, pianos didn’t change,” he said. “I think today we need a change.”

The instrument is the first to use digitally modeled notes rather than sampled sounds from other acoustics, letting players virtually create both classic piano sounds and more futuristic hybrids — like that of a physically impossible silver-string-wound piano.

Other companies outfitted products with online and iPhone hookups to target X- and Y-generation users. QRS incorporated MIDI technology into an entire line of its Story & Clark acoustics. And Baldwin received a “Best In Show” nod for its My First Baldwin, a children’s piano that converts into a desk and iPhone-controllable stereo.

As a final piece of advice to Roland dealers on the first night of the show, Kakehashi addressed financial stresses with a firm warning. “Don’t join the price war,” he said. “People have upset the industry [by doing that] in the past. Enjoy your business. This is the time to harvest.”

NEW DELIVERY SYSTEMS

As printed music moves from page to CD to USB, publishers began offering new products and solutions to help dealers stay with the times.

Several publishers mentioned growing sales in books packaged with play-along CDs and DVDs. Hal Leonard recently signed on to distribute DrumFun’s expansive Turn It Up & Lay It Down play-along drum series, and Carl Fischer executives named the company’s Creating And Performing Drum Loops DVD and companion book/CD as one of its recent best sellers.

Still, with the growth of downloadable sheet music as a cost-saving alternative to print, some publishers decided to wait out what they see as a short-lived CD storm. Kjos’ David Gereghty said his company is moving away from packaging books with CDs. “Instead of worrying about the production costs of CDs, users will just download [music and lessons] to their iPods,” he said, adding that he sees the thumb-sized USB flash drive as a more portable, efficient alternative to the compact disc.

FreeHand Systems now provides such smaller solutions. Its Sheet Music On A Stick line offers piano sheet music of popular selections on a USB memory stick. The files, which come 25 per drive for about $24.95, are interactive, letting players transpose songs into any key and change the playback instrumentation. “We want to make [sheet music] cool, hip and interactive,” said FreeHand Vice President Sarah Shreve.

Reaching out to dealers and Generation X and Y users, Alfred’s new Total Sheet Music program offers a growing number of downloadable sheet and guitar tablature titles from its Web site. Dealers can sign up for the site’s Affiliate Partner Program, so customers can access Total Sheet Music’s online database on in-store computers. Or, customers can link through a store’s Web site. Partnering dealers receive an 8-percent commission on sales.

From the other end of the Internet, Mel Bay has found that bloggers have helped generate sales for its niche products. Mel Bay President Bryndon Bay said that Ted Eschliman’s Getting Into Jazz Mandolin and Tony Trischka’s Fiddle Tunes For Banjo received buzz on blogs before they were released to the public.

“When [a product] comes out, there’s already a market for it,” Bay said.