

Editor's comment

WHY HARROGATE IS MUCH LOVED

OUTSIDERS often fail to appreciate the affinity the flooring trade has for Harrogate. This hospitable North Yorkshire town has hosted flooring shows since the early 1960s. My first visit to what was then known as the Harrogate Carpet Fair was in 1984.

That was 25 years ago – before the advent of the internet and the universal use of mobile phones. I clearly recall the genuine excitement the show generated through the trade.

In those days the exhibition was centred on Harrogate's historic Royal Hall. Such was the demand for space that exhibitors were crammed into corridors, the underground car park and a large marquee, sited where Hall M is today.

That remained the trade's premier annual exhibition until around 1987 when it gave way to Interfloor, a new show at the NEC, which was destined to become the UK's biggest exhibition centre. The organisers of Interfloor, with an eye on expected financial rewards, believed the flooring industry would quickly transfer its allegiance to Birmingham.

They were wrong. Starved of support, Interfloor survived only a couple of years. And in 1993 the trade returned to Harrogate with the launch of the National Floor Show. Once again, flooring people took over the town in their hundreds. Harrogate's convenient complex of centrally located hotels, restaurants, bars, and cafes – all within an easy walk from the exhibition – resounded to laughter, lively banter and the more serious business of selling floorcoverings.

Moving the show to Manchester's GMEX was considered, partly to avoid the current rebuilding work at the Harrogate centre, but this proposal was wisely shelved.

Admittedly, the show is likely to be much more sombre this year. Many are struggling against giant financial difficulties. Some, including a few big names, have disappeared forever. But the 2009 Harrogate exhibition will be as crucial to the flooring industry as it has ever been.

Mobile phones, the internet and social networking sites are absolutely no substitute for real face-to-face contact with your suppliers. The first year I visited the Harrogate fair the only twitter heard was from birds, or perhaps the shrill incoherent mutterings of carpet reps staggering back to their hotels at 4am, after several drinks too many.

Anyone who believes that live exhibitions are past their sell-by date is sadly mistaken. Regardless of the future of digital communications, trade shows will always be a vital business tool. The latest international research confirms that eyeball-to-eyeball interaction at trade events provides the best return on investment (ROI), leading to significantly stronger business relationships than any other form of marketing, including direct mail and internet promotions.

Live networking in a relaxed environment is the key. And for that there is no better place than Harrogate.



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For starters:

Sheikh is a mover

Getting around really big exhibitions, like Domotex, can be hard on the feet. But one Arab sheikh was reportedly seen at a recent major trade fair in Dubai riding up and down the aisles in a golf buggy. Perhaps he wanted to get around the sprawling show in two sheikhs.

His minders, deprived of that luxury, were apparently left to jog after him; presumably they had been told to sheikh a leg.

But after seeing nobody else from his social rank, the VIP was heard to comment that the show was – guess what – *no great sheikhs!*



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