

Industry News

Focused, no-frills approach keeps Karel shows growing

By David Perry

AVENTURA, Fla. – As the leaves fall in North Carolina and another edition of the High Point Market looms, one furniture market veteran here is once again planning to skip the industry's biggest event.

Larry Karel, president of Karel Exposition Management, based here, has built a career out of offering regional furniture shows that offer low-cost, no-frills events far from the bright spotlights of the industry's big national shows. He's focused on his niche business.

Karel talks about the big national markets, which he says can be costly for buyers and sellers alike. But he doesn't have any interest in visiting a show like High Point, he says.

"There will always be a good High Point," Karel commented the other day. "But I have no intention of going there." He's got to be one of the few people in the home furnishings industry never to attend the market in High Point.

Perhaps his reluctance stems from the fact that he doesn't want to add another business trip to his agenda. After all, he's spent almost half a century criss-crossing the country, looking for just the right show venues for his regional furniture and accessory markets. He's hosted shows in cities all across the country, including Atlanta, Chicago, Columbus, Ohio, Denver, Fitchburg, Mass., Fort Lauderdale, Hartford, Conn. Las Vegas, Miami, Miami Beach, Nashville, New York City and Tampa, Fla.



Karel, 67, says he's more excited than ever about his regional shows. "I really don't have competition," he said. One of the dozens of promotional flyers his company produces puts it this way: "When it comes to regional furniture markets ... NOBODY does it better!"

Larry Karel has carved out a niche for his company in serving the needs of home furnishings retailers who are located less than a tank of gas away from his shows. Those are retailers who don't have the time or money to attend national shows, he contends. In fact, some of them only have time to attend a single day of his shows, which typically start on Sunday and end on Tuesday. He knows the retailers want to be in their stores on their big weekend selling days.

Karel works hard to keep his shows "clean," which means they are focused on meeting the needs of bona fide retailers and home furnishings producers. Children under 13 aren't allowed on the show floor. Don't look for companies selling jewelry. "I just don't believe in that," Karel said. "It's not professional."

One occupational hazard of serving smaller retailers and producers is that they are more susceptible to business downturns. Karel

His current show calendar includes five cities: Edison, N.J., with shows next year in February and August, Los Angeles, with shows next year in April and October, Atlantic City, N.J., with a show next May, Houston, also with a show next May, and Orlando, with a show next August.

Those shows give him plenty of travel for the year, he says.

said that a number have gone out of business this year. But he's heartened that the industry is also attracting new players on both the wholesale and retail sides of the business.

And Karel believes steady promotion, a hallmark of his business, will pay dividends for him. "People will get used to these tougher times," he said. "We have to promote more to make going to our shows a habit. I'm already seeing that pay off."