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Marine Expo's local debut gets kudos and suggestions

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After packing up ship, attendees and planners of the Commercial Marine Expo - a first for the Half Moone Cruise & Celebration Center, the Norfolk site where it was held - gave feedback on the event.

Hosted by Nauticus, the expo took place June 22-23.

"We don't have a final count yet, but frankly, the attendance was lighter than we anticipated. But the quality of attendees was great," said Ted Hugger of Highliner Events LLC, director of the expo.

Show planners expected 3,000 to 4,000 professionals in the maritime industry to attend the event, but won't know actual attendance numbers until a month or so.

Overall, Hugger said he believed the expo, which drew about 250 companies, was a success.

"We were able to establish the show in a new market, and that's sort of a Herculean feat in itself," Hugger said. Participants are getting acclimated with the market, he said. "The audience that we had was very qualified - that was really important."

Highliner Events invested more than \$100,000 in marketing for attendees, according to Hugger.

Now that they've gotten over the first hurdle - becoming a known event in the area - the goal will be to fine-tune marketing strategies based on data from the event.

"What we've heard from exhibitors is they all agree that Norfolk was a great place, and the Half Moone was an excellent location for the show," Hugger said. "Our job is to increase the numbers and maintain the quality."

The show will rotate each year between Norfolk and New Bedford, Mass., where the expo occurred last year.

Ernest Ellis Jr., an exhibitor at the two-day event, said foot traffic had dwindled by the second day of the expo.

But he said he'd come back to Norfolk in 2013 for the event.

"We could come back and participate - and we do shows all over the world," said Ellis, president of Sea-Fire, a Maryland-based manufacturer of fire suppression and detection systems.

Sea-Fire participates in some sort of show at least twice a month, Ellis said.

"I voiced earlier to the show organizers that the expo was very good," he said.

Ellis said he especially liked being on the second floor of the Half Moone. He appreciated the facility's natural light.

It didn't hurt that his company gained some business at the expo.

During the first day, he met a local participant who was retrofitting one of his ships.

The next morning, Ellis went to the attendee's site in Portsmouth to do business, prior to the start of day two of the expo.

"It's the quality of foot traffic, not necessarily the quantity," Ellis said.

Pam McSwain, vice president of sales and marketing for Parker Systems Inc., a Chesapeake environmental supply house, said that the expo had potential although she wasn't quite satisfied with the turnout.

"I think it's a great expo to have here," she said of the Half Moone location. "I think it was new, that's why we didn't have as much traffic as we thought."

McSwain said she found out about the event at the beginning of June.

"There were only three booths left by the time we heard about it," she said.

McSwain talked to several people on the lower level, and said they'd expressed similar thoughts about the lack of foot traffic.

The Half Moone Cruise & Celebration Center, a \$36 million facility that opened in 2007, has gradually become a site catering to a number of uses and events rather than one used primarily as a cruise terminal because of the slumping cruise market in Norfolk.

Stephen Kirkland, Norfolk's cruise manager, said that he was thrilled with the expo.

"Not only were these attendees coming from all over the mid-Atlantic, staying at our hotels and eating at our restaurants, so were the vendors," Kirkland said.

"It showed what this multipurpose facility could do. We have never hosted anything that large, so we were stretching our legs a little bit."

Kirkland said that using the Half Moone for alternative events didn't mean that cruises weren't a priority for the terminal.

"We are still aggressively pursuing cruise," Kirkland said. "This is not a replacement at all for cruise. It's something we will do in addition."