

A NEW ERA

GUITAR MANUFACTURERS STRIKE A BALANCE BETWEEN BUILDING BETTER GEAR & KEEPING THE INDUSTRY ACCESSIBLE

BY ALEX HARRELL

Just as The NAMM Show expanded its reach, so did the guitar world.

The Guitar and Accessories Marketing Association's (GAMA) annual meeting set the tone for what to expect at The NAMM Show. Held the morning before the show officially started, GAMA assembled a panel of MI experts to discuss finding growth and success in today's business culture.

The biggest takeaway? Expanding the market.

"It's incumbent on our magazines and on the manufacturers to find who excites younger people as we look to get the next generation excited about the guitar," said Mike Molenda of Guitar Player magazine. "We might have to search a little harder for those guitar heroes ... But we have to find them and expose them."

The necessity of growing the market isn't a revolutionary idea, but the ways in which manufacturers set out to do so has been.

FOLLOWING FEEDBACK

Though the best piece of advice for those posting online is to never read the comments, guitar manufacturers have been sifting through gear forums in search of genuine feedback and suggestions for improving their products.

"There's such an active community of guitar players on the internet that there's a lot of valuable information out there," said Tony Rauser, director of artist relations at ESP Guitars. "We really pay attention; we look at the feedback, try to listen to everybody, see the trends and then adjust to that."

Which led to the company debuting its

ESP E-II line — formerly known as the ESP Standard Line — featuring the highly requested Bare Knuckle Pickups used in some of the models, such as the seven-string Hipshot.

"You gotta listen to the consumer; they're the ones buying the guitars," Rauser said. "And there was a big calling for using Bare Knuckle Pickups — they have a very high perceived value in the eyes of players, so it was just one of those things that we decided to listen to our fans and put into our guitars."

Consumers also requested single pickup production guitars that weren't as pricey as the Signature series. Thus, ESP released the LTD Black Metal Series: single pickups featuring Macassar ebony fingerboards with no inlays and glow-in-the-dark side markers, and a newly designed black metal LTD logo on the headstock. (That newly designed headstock? Another forum-motivated decision).

"It's the way of the future," Rauser said in regard to following the feedback. "You gotta embrace it. If you don't, you're going to be left behind."

Corey Witt, product marketing manager for Korg, echoed similar sentiments.

"If a company wants to survive in 2018, they're going to be online — seeing what people are doing, what they're talking about, what direction things are going," Witt said. "What you have to do is find a way to discern between something that's really insightful and something that needs to be defined."

For Blackstar Amplification, these amateur product developers' comments led to the company debuting the Unity Series,

the first-ever bass amplifier line in its 10-year history.

"After 10 years, [Blackstar] can keep reiterating electric guitar amps, or they can try and move the flag from the moon to Mars by getting into the bass world," Witt said. "It was a good place to go, 'All right, we weren't a flash in the pan. It's not a fluke, we're still here and growing.'"

"Sometimes you have to listen to the customers. Other times you have to go, 'This is what the market's doing. I'm going to do something that's unexpected and still badass.' So it takes some confidence and risk to be able to do those things."

EXPANDING OFFERINGS

Blackstar wasn't the only company entering new territory at this year's show. For the first time in its 85-year history, D'Angelico debuted a collection of solid-body guitars.

"We've always been waiting for the right time to make a proper delve into solid bodies, but we didn't feel like the time was right until recently," said Ryan Kershaw, D'Angelico's director, creative and artist relations. "Largely it's because the brand has grown so much; people know that the modern incarnation of D'Angelico is making high-quality products."

In 2011, D'Angelico was purchased and re-established by Brenden Cohen. For the past seven years, according to Kershaw, the company has strived to make the best products at affordable prices — and original D'Angelico guitars aren't necessarily known for being inexpensive.

"We really built up the things that we're



Fender's Justin Norvell and Andy Mooney



Taylor Guitars' Andy Powers | Photo courtesy of NAMM



Yamaha's Armando Vega and Stephanie Talarico



D'Angelico's Brenden Cohen highlights the company's Deluxe Bedford solid-body guitar.



Electro-Harmonix's Jon Skibic, Lawrence DeMarco and Irina Yalkowsky



From left, D'Addario's Steve Mucciolo, Brian Vance and Rob Cunningham.



U.S. Music's Gil Soucy and Jonathan Lee



Martin Guitar's Chris Martin, right, and visual artist Robert Goetzl with the X Series D-420 dreadnought.

known for, and then we decided that right now is the time where we have enough eyes on us," he continued. "We're a legitimized brand now, so it made sense to speak to that other judge chunk of the guitar industry by making solid bodies."

Yamaha — a legitimized brand that's been making instruments for 129 years — has continuously strived to develop the ultimate guitar. But, unlike D'Angelico, it's struggled with finding its cool factor.

"There were times when we were attempting to be cool, and that made us *not* cool," laughed Armando Vega, Yamaha's marketing manager of guitars, basses and amplifiers. "We reached outside of ourselves and asked, 'What makes Yamaha cool?' And one of the big themes that came back was motorcycles."

Plus, Vega continued, over the years, RevStar became a line that tied Yamaha to its Japanese lineage. So, the company released seven Café Racer bikes and Japanese-culture-inspired finishes for its Revstar series, including colors like Snake Eye Green, Vintage Japanese Denim and Shop Black.

"We've also found that the next generation of guitarists is looking for something that's different but familiar looking," Vega said. "They *want* to be different. They *want* to stand out. They *want* an identity — their own identity. So, that's one of the things, we feel like we're really on target with where we're going with it and embracing who we are, but also giving somebody a new option that makes them just a little bit different, but pop out, you know."

INCREASING ACCESSIBILITY

Similarly, Fender added more shape and style offerings to its already existing California se-



The GAMA panel, from left, Squiggy DiGiacomo, Laura B. Whitmore, Mike Molenda and Menzie Pittman.



Cole Clark Guitars' Miles Jackson



ESP Guitars' Tony Rauser with the LTD NW-44 Neil Westfall Signature guitar.

ries. Its latest campaign — titled “Play Something Different” — features punk groups such as Culture Abuse and The Regrettes and is intended to appeal to more types of players.

“We want people that are more influencers and like, you know, up-and-comers doing things that are slightly off the beaten path, right,” said Billy Martinez, Fender’s vice president category manager of acoustic and Squier divisions.

Fender’s California Series models come in three body shapes — the Malibu, the Newporter and the Redondo — that feature user-friendly appointments and price points for different playing levels.

“From the time you decide you want to play guitar to getting an instrument and everything you need; it’s an all-encompassing thing for our brand, so we’re really excited to be doing it,” Martinez said. “What we’re really doing is looking at all different types of players at every stage of the musical journey; that’s a big staple for us.”

In fact, several years ago, Fender conducted a study that found 50 percent of every new player is female. And three-quarters of that 50 percent want to play acoustic.

“But that doesn’t mean they only want to play a natural dreadnought, which is all big and bulky. That also doesn’t mean that they want some little parlor,” Martinez said. “They just want an option in there that fits what *they* are. And that’s our approach when we’re looking at instruments as a whole.”

And where some companies reinvented, reimagined or redesigned their products, Taylor Guitars rethought the purpose a guitar serves, and therefore how to better serve [its] players.

The company released its V-

Class bracing system — a sonic engine that transforms the way an acoustic guitar top vibrates to improve the sound — developed by master builder Andy Powers at the show.

“I mean, you look at guitar braces, and it’s like a feature on a spec sheet. But what it actually stands for is almost like a total reconstruction of how we build and listen to acoustic guitars,” Powers said, explaining that with a steel string guitar, there are inherent structural compromises; it’s traditionally difficult to balance both sustain and flexibility.

“So I came up with a way to divide it and make the guitar work in a more systemic way, so that every note has a great dynamic range and long sustain,” he continued. “And, kind of along the way, I realized [that] this allows the builder to have a lot more control of things like the intonation of the guitar, the projection to balance, the overall responsiveness, the touch sensitivity. So with these guitars, they’re working in this way that it feels like it’s opening totally new creative territory for a musician. It’s kind of like an open book now. Anything goes.”

In fact, that new creative territory partially inspired Powers to create the V-Class bracing. More musicians are using their instruments in different ways, he said, and even more so are using them to make careers on social platforms [like] YouTube and Instagram. He wanted to build a guitar that would still work well — even when next to a synthesizer in a home studio.

“We’re doing our very best to build the very best instruments that we can for musicians,” Powers said. “And tomorrow, we’re going to try and do even better.” **MI**