

EBACE - 'glass half full'



Times are tough, but we shouldn't overdo the despondency, says business aviation. Report: Mike Jerram

Held at Geneva's PalExpo Centre between 12-14 May, the 2009 European Business Aviation Convention and Exhibition opened for the first time in its nine-year history with the expectation of Bad News. The economic downturn, and particularly the poor press received by users of corporate aircraft in the wake of the US car manufacturers' 'begging bowl' trip to Washington aboard business jets, boded for an air of doom and gloom.

Not so, insisted European Business Aviation Association President and Chief Executive Officer Brian Humphries in his opening address. Noting that EBAA membership was up 17% on the year to an all-time high, he continued: "As this show gets under way amidst one of the worst economic downturns anyone can remember I take great encouragement from the level of participation and support we're seeing at this year's event."

Humphries noted that 411 exhibitors had taken 1,900 booth spaces, with some would-be attendees left on a waiting list, the crowded static display on the ramp at Geneva-Cointrin Airport boasted 65 aircraft, five more than in 2008, and the number of registered delegates was just four per cent down on 2008.

While Humphries concedes that "times are still extremely tough for everyone in European business aviation", with traffic down month after month across the European Union, he is optimistic that bottoming-out is close at hand.

"We're not down in our boots, but there's no doubt about it, everyone's laying off people, furloughing them," says Humphries. "I don't think we are going to see much more of a downturn. I think we'll see a levelling-off, and that's what the figures seem to be telling us. We keep our fingers crossed."

He believes that some companies which are currently sensitive about being seen travelling in business aircraft will be forced back into operating or chartering them because airlines are cutting schedule frequencies and routes to stay profitable. This will drive companies to charter the smallest suitable aircraft and fill them.

"I think one of the biggest differences between European and US corporations is that US company aircraft tend to be allocated to directors, whereas in Europe they are definitely egalitarian tools, and I think this philosophy will pay off," he said.

In his keynote speech on the opening day of the show, Cessna Chairman, President and Chief Executive Officer Jack Pelton adopted a "glass half-full" approach to the recession. "The current meltdown in business aviation activity, while the most profound in many years, is best kept in perspective when discussing the global role of business aviation

and of Cessna," he noted.

"Rather than focus on what we *aren't* producing, (we) have chosen to focus on what we *are* producing. It is true that we will not produce at the levels anticipated a year ago, but we are going to deliver about 300 Citations in 2009, slightly fewer than in 2010, and these are numbers that in years past would have been cause for celebration. We will spend about the same percentage of revenue in 2009 on new product and new feature development, and we will spend it on satisfying customer requirements for existing products in existing markets." ■

Photos: Mike Vines



Top: not bad for the middle of a meltdown - busy EBACE ramp

Left: Embraer Phenom, now with EASA certification

Below: fully 65 aircraft in static display

