

# Supersized in the Big Apple

Crowds at Vision Expo East reached a record high this year, creating the need for a supersized exhibition. **Joe Ayling** reports from the New York event

It was the wee man who made the biggest impression at a Vision Expo East exhibition that was all about scale.

From the giant portions in the Jacob Javits Center food court to monster stands assembled by industry behemoths, this was the world's largest economy doing business the only way it knows how.

Exhibitors had every reason to be confident because the event, held from March 23-25, attracted attendance figures not even witnessed during the boom times. In total, 16,317 eye care professionals attended, up 10 per cent from last year and the highest since the annual event began in 1986.

The appearance of Jason Acuña, known as Wee Man on the MTV series *Jackass*, brought droves of celebrity spotters to the Von Zipper stand.

Nick Woolery, marketing manager of Von Zipper, said: 'He has been with the brand since breaking through as a professional skateboarder. He is part of the family and one of our friends. It is not just about "put this on that person because it looks cool". There is much more to it than that.'

Music was blaring from the Von Zipper stand, where Acuña modelled the Frosteez collection of sunglasses, said to have sold out in the US market since February's launch. Retailing at \$80-\$105, colour tones included purple, ice blue and green.

Von Zipper's celebrity endorsement was just a hint of the marketing prowess on show. Opposite in the main exhibition hall was the equally loud Safilo Group stand, with rivals Viva International Group, Luxottica Group and Marchon Eyewear in closer proximity than normal. The entertainment value of this muscle-flexing competition made leaving the

side wall of level three a difficult task.

Safilo drew the crowds on day one with a catwalk show presented by US celebrity stylist Carson Kressley. He introduced models wearing Safilo brands including Alexander McQueen, Gucci and Tommy Hilfiger before the catwalk imploded into a fully functioning bar for optical buyers to rest weary limbs. Even the company's factory base, which includes Italy, Slovenia, China and the US, was advertised.

Luxottica set up a booth for its Ray-Ban sunglass brand so that visitors could have their picture taken in a chosen favourite pair of Ray-Bans against a certain background. This attracted a somewhat never-ending queue of people, while Marchon's idea to fill huge bowls with M&M's sweets and give away free iPads guaranteed a log jam of eye care professionals buzzing with e-numbers.

## Handsome Harley

Viva International also got into the swing of things by parking a pristine Harley Davidson motorcycle at the head of its stand to promote the namesake optical range. The group's Harley Davidson women's ophthalmic range of frames were launched at last year's Vision Expo East, adding to men's and children's ranges already popular across the US.

Although currently limited to the Americas, Harley frames could also be passing through a UK town before too long. Michael Rodin, associate vice president of international at Viva, said: 'Harley is not really a UK collection at the moment. We do want to [enter the market] but with a more highly sophisticated collection.'

Speaking about this year's event, Rodin explained how the primary



goal at Vision Expo was to service a domestic population of around 330 million people with eyewear. Mido, held earlier in March, was where Viva came out with a strong launch of new collections, he said.

'Vision Expo East is primarily a US-focused show,' added Rodin. 'The stand looks amazing and our presence here is a show of strength of the business we have in the US market.'

An audit of attendees from Vision



- 1 The never-ending queue at the Ray-Ban stand
- 2 Bianco by Fatheadz
- 3 Viva International promoted its range with a Harley Davidson motorcycle
- 4 Foley by Fatheadz
- 5 Jason Acuña, known as Wee Man on the MTV series *Jackass*

including UK firms Tom Davies, Oliver Goldsmith and William Morris.

Also exhibiting in the Galleria was Danish company Ørgreen, whose brand identity seemed to fit well with white-carpeted, plant-lined spaces. Gregers Fastrup, Ørgreen sales director and joint owner, reported a sense of realism between exhibitors and buyers despite ongoing uncertainties in the wider economy.

He said: 'I think Silmo last year was a turning point when people were no longer talking in terms of prices. It has been a very good year for us so far and although there are still problems and questions economically, practices have adapted to the new situation.'

'Practices are acting in a different way to before the crisis, and are more concerned about excess inventories. It makes good sense to reduce retail inventories but it means we have to do more practice visits to make sure frames are available to patients.'

Therefore, although challenges remain in the US market, evidence that optical suppliers better understand how practices need to adapt is another explanation for the show's buoyant atmosphere. Celebrity appearances, flamboyant stands and the odd Harley Davidson did no harm either.

Show organisers this side of the pond will be looking for similar levels of optimism at Optrafair 2013 in Birmingham, and while following New York's example will be tough, there can be no half measures. ●

● A further report on the key collections on show during this year's Vision Expo East will follow in the 18.05.12 edition of *Optician*. Next year's event takes place from March 14-17, at the Jacob Javits Center.

Expo East 2011, when 83.3 per cent of visitors were from the US, would support this trend. The remaining 2,532-strong contingent of European visitors demonstrates there is also an appetite for adopting US styles and ideas though.

## Fit for Fatheadz

One brand confident it could blaze a trail in the UK market was Fatheadz Eyewear, which sells custom frames for people with large heads. Since starting up eight years ago, Fatheadz has grown to be retail giant Wal-Mart's 15th highest selling frame in the US, company founder and CEO Rico Elmore told *Optician* in New York. He added: 'The question is, does everyone buy a size 10 shoe? No they don't, and that is no different for eyewear.'

Indianapolis-based Fatheadz ships its oversized ophthalmic and sunglass collections directly to the UK, but said distribution talks with Asda Opticians – another part of the Wal-Mart empire – had come to no avail so far. 'Our big need is for a distributor over there,' said

Elmore. 'Import costs are expensive and make it difficult to serve the demand.'

There was an amended layout for this year's Vision Expo East, making room for a cosy fourth floor French Loft area for emerging designers. Construction work at the Jacob Javits Center did not stop the overall floor plan expanding by 10 per cent compared to last year – rising to 312,823 square feet.

Deborah Castor, vice president of shows and meetings for The Vision Council, said: 'Every disruption brings opportunity. Reed Exhibitions and The Vision Council rose to the challenge when presented with several show floor design constraints due to the ongoing construction at the Javits Center.'

The new split-floor plan housed technology and education on level one, with a main area on level three dedicated to eyewear and accessories. A far less frantic Galleria zone was set up in the North Hall and mainly occupied by boutique European exhibitors