

NeoCon East Survives a Three-time Date Switch in Baltimore

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Since 2003, Merchandise Mart Properties Inc.'s NeoCon East show, which sells furniture to government agencies, among others, has enjoyed success in the October/November time frame in Baltimore.

That success seemed poised to continue for this year's show as well, until it lost its October dates to another event, and new dates were given at the end of the September.

For most shows, a date shift of a month might not be that big of a deal, but for NeoCon East, which heavily depends on government agency buyers whose fiscal years starts Oct. 1, September was a no-go for the event.



“The dates were Sept. 29-30, which may seem good, but it’s a tough time for agencies,” said Mark Falanga, executive vice president of MMPI. “It’s their busiest time of the year. They were in no position to come to the show. (Those) were really awful dates.”

He added that Visit Baltimore, the city’s convention and visitors bureau, didn’t take into account the show’s total hotel occupancy rate when it decided to give NeoCon’s dates to another show.

“They felt like they had some better business to put into our rotation,” Falanga said.

Mark Dunkum, director of the General Services Administration’s Integrated Workplace Acquisition Center, which co-sponsors the show and represents government agency buyers, said of the September dates, “My initial reaction was (those dates) just really won’t work.”

He added that government agency buyers are really busy at that time of year trying to spend the rest of their budgets, and the vendors are just as busy trying to fill them. In other words, neither side would have time to come to a show.

There were several talks with Visit Baltimore officials about the impact of the show, he added, and new dates were offered in December, just two weeks before Christmas.

When Dunkum heard about the new dates, he said, “We can live with it, but we’re not excited about it.”

Casey Journigan, president of La Palma, Calif.-based furniture company Arcadia, said his company has exhibited at NeoCon East since the show launched, and he was willing to deal with the September dates, but the switch to December was another matter.

“The December dates just put us over the top,” he added. “It was right before Christmas, and our representative (for the region) said, ‘There’s just no way.’”

In August, just four months before the December event, Falanga said the show – Pri-Med – which had been given NeoCon’s original Oct. 28-29 dates, was not going to be able to fill the showfloor space it had booked at the Baltimore Convention Center, and NeoCon was offered the chance to fill the empty space.

NeoCon had yet another challenge on its plate – letting all of the potential and existing attendees and exhibitors who were planning to come in December know that now the show was going to be held in October.

“It was the third time we had to go to everyone and say, ‘Hey look, it’s early August, and we can move the show to October, will you stick with us?’” Falanga said. “Pretty much everyone said yes to that.”

It took an aggressive marketing campaign that included direct mail, e-mails, social media, advertising and hiring a team of temps to come in and call every person who had ever attended NeoCon East in the past, to let them all know about the new October dates, but the efforts paid off.

“In two-and-a-half months, we sold out the hall and had a great show,” Falanga said.

Journigan added, “It was the best NeoCon East we ever had. It was just great.”

Next year’s show will be held Nov. 2-3, and the following year, the dates will be Oct. 31-Nov. 1. After all of the upheaval, Falanga said, “I think Baltimore better understands our show. They are probably a lot less inclined to mess with our dates.”

He added, “We have a much closer relationship now with the CVB and convention center.”