

From The Hot Seat | August 2018 | Farnborough Field Report

FIA 2018 (Farnborough International Airshow) is an international trade show with an intense focus on aerospace (space, commercial and military aircraft, helicopters and aviation drones). The show offers connections and meetings with high-level executive and decision makers from around the globe. But for me it is an adrenaline rush to touch, smell, hear and feel the planes.



Years ago as I started my engineering career, I had an office on the flight line at NAS Point Mugu. My job was performing lethality analysis on combat air-to-air missiles. As part of my job, I was able to walk onto the flight line or into the hangars and be next to the F-4s and newly minted F-14s (yes, I do have a few years on me...45 years ago!). My office was about mid-point off the runway... about the rotate point on normal take-off. I regularly could “feel” the power of takeoff rumble across the tarmac at usually open office window. It was a constant rush as planes took off regularly for training and testing missions.

At FIA everyone gets to “feel” it as the F-16 makes its full power low-level pass over the field 200 yards away. The vibration of the 120 dB sounds brings my blood to boil, again making me feel 23 again. I never got to fly in one of those beasts, but I always feel a part of it from my days on the flight line.

Having painted a picture of the typical weekend spectator airshow, FIA is not about an airshow. The aircraft sounds and feel are but background music to the real-life play with 75,000 actors from all parts of the world. Why go to an international airshow? It’s about contacts and meetings you cannot make at home. In our normal business development activities, I go to meet high-level individuals who are protected at home by “gatekeepers”. My focus is executives from the US. FIA is where you can have a meeting with executives of companies without the gate-keepers’ interference.

It is a ton of work. I start 3-4 weeks in advance setting meetings with companies I want to meet. My meetings are very often with Director, VP, and CEO levels. Making a connection at this level is far more productive than beginning at lower organizational levels. The show itself is a walking workout. For four full days, you are in constant motion moving between four huge halls and weaving through 1500 exhibitors.

I return home, and now the real work begins. Follow-up on your 25 scheduled meetings and 15 unscheduled visits to your stand. Turning one or two of these into a long-term business relationship will take many more contacts and time. The sales cycle in the aviation is long and not easy to break. Farnborough, Paris, Eurosatory, SpaceTech, and DESI all give us a jump start on shortening the sales cycle. Consistent messages, persistent attendance, real differentiators, effective follow up, and a bit of right-place/right-time luck, make international tradeshow a great start at creating business relationships.....and the psyche is excited by the sounds, smells, and feel of raw power!

All those things that made me want to become an engineer come alive again. It’s a kick.

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