

Oil Market Report: May 2019

For Team Portland, Spring is characterised by a string of oil and logistics exhibitions across the UK, all of which provide a useful “temperature check” on the industry we are in and the industries we serve. Not only that, they are also a great opportunity to get out and meet customers, understand the latest trends shaping the fuel world and properly road-test an extensive range of hangover cures.

Kicking the Spring season off is the Petrol Forecourt Show, which takes place at the NEC in April and is the main pow-wow for the country’s Petrol Retailers (ie, those businesses that own and operate petrol forecourts). What was noticeable about this year’s event was just how few “traditional” exhibitors were present (eg, wet-stock management, hose manufacturers, site-survey providers etc) and just how much focus there was on technology, data and automation. Perhaps a reflection of the key ingredients now required to run a successful forecourt in today’s highly competitive, low margin petrol retail environment.

On its heels is one of the UK’s largest business events – the Commercial Vehicle Show (or CV Show as it is more commonly known). This giant event, also at the NEC but spanning 5 enormous halls, is so humungously large that to get round all the stands, pretty much takes a full 3 days! It’s all blue-chip, no-expense spared stuff and clearly if you like looking at spanking new pieces of transport kit (and who doesn’t like marvelling at a brand new 44 tonne truck?!), then this is the one for you! Having that, for this attendee, the sheer scale of the CV show is possibly its biggest weakness. The throng and sheer weight of visitor numbers can make meaningful commercial conversations difficult and the atmosphere at times feels rather impersonal.

The same could not be said for the Federation of Petroleum Suppliers (FPS) annual Expo, held in Liverpool’s docklands. This popular event is an old favourite amongst oil lifers, mainly because it is so personal, and clearly because it also involves very little work and a large amount of socialising. This year however, things had been shaken-up a little. Firstly the Annual General Meeting was held in public (on the exhibition floor) and part of those proceedings was to change the name of the organisation. Henceforth, the Federation of Petroleum Suppliers will be called the UK & Ireland Fuel Distributors Association, neatly dropping the word “Petroleum” from the title and thus reflecting the current environmental and green zeitgeist. The Expo also saw for the first time a string of discussion topics and seminars, many of which had titles such as “Clean Growth Strategies”, “New Fuel Technologies” and “The Road to [Carbon] Zero”, again demonstrating that this most traditional of industries is steadily moving to embrace a new energy world.

Which is also very much the case in the Bus Industry, which in May headed to Cardiff for its annual ALBUM Conference. On the surface, the Association of Local Bus Company Managers doesn’t radiate much of a rock and roll feel, but nonetheless the ALBUM event has long been a Portland favourite - combining as it does, future mobility, urban planning, a similar convivial atmosphere to FPS and of course, the mandatory big pieces of transportation gear. On top of that, when it comes to diesel and all things fuel, the current juncture of the bus industry is truly fascinating. Everyone knows (in the sector at least) that Euro VI diesel engines are the cleanest combustion engines ever made (95% cleaner than the previous Euro V engines and half the pro-rated emissions of the equivalent Euro 6 car engine), but everyone is equally aware that pressure for ever greener technologies is relentless. So like inveterate gamblers at the casino table, bus operators are placing their chips on every possible new form of fuelling technology; Electric, Hydrogen, Biofuels, Renewable Diesel, Compressed Natural Gas, Biomethane and (now and again) Unicorn Juice. One of these fuelling technologies will be the dominant public transport fuel of the future and the fresh thinking around this subject at ALBUM, shows that the bus operators of 2019 are 100% ready for this particular challenge.

By June the Spring Conference season is over for another year and colleagues will no doubt say that it is high time to get back to some real work! But attending conferences and exhibitions provides a great opportunity to learn, network and sell. Moreover, they offer a real indicator to the health of an industry and quite frankly on that front, the pulse was strong across the board. Despite all the likely bumps in the road ahead, excitement about the future was palpable, innovation was evident everywhere and most people seemed to agree that challenges are likely to bring more opportunities than threats. A new energy revolution? Bring it on!