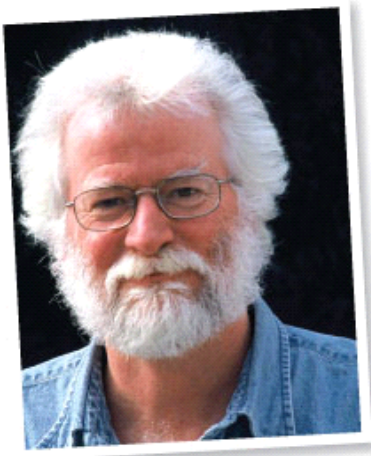


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## Is “Safety in Numbers” Back?

*John Friel*



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I was watching the birds at my feeder yesterday, with periodic interruptions to chase away a marauding squirrel who seemed sure he also was invited. Squirrels are ingenious, nimble fellows who always have a Plan B for thwarting allegedly squirrel-proof feeders. I was reminded, oddly, of a long-ago trade show.

Squirrels and trade shows are not, admittedly, intuitive partners. But this guy's contortions brought back a cringe-worthy memory of the one time in my life I locked myself out of a car. As luck would have it, it was at a trade show, a continent away from home, two states from the car rental agency. As I juggled breakfast, show-floor badge and who-knows-what-else in the bowels of the convention center parking garage, rushing to get to my booth, the keys slipped unnoticed off my lap, landing between the driver's seat and the door. Which then closed and locked.

I probably said, loudly, a version of “Oops!” that couldn't be printed in this magazine or most others. I called a locksmith. He arrived promptly with a bag of squirrel-worthy gadgets that had me back inside the vehicle retrieving my keys in under three minutes. It was an impressive illustration of the adage that locks exist to keep honest people honest.

As for the return of large industry events: A recent article from the Trade Show News Network claims that trade shows are “less risky than essential daily activities.” That conclusion was drawn from computer modeling research by Epistemix, a Pennsylvania-based firm with a strong background in tracking and predicting epidemic trends.

The study was produced by a partnership between Epistemix and Freeman, a global event management company. The Exhibitions and Conferences Alliance also supported the research, which says most business travelers are vaccinated and conventions are statistically far safer than the cities surrounding them.

Would it be fair to say these messengers have an axe to grind? Oh, heck yeah. It would be naive to expect such a team to tell you to stay home. But that being said, I'm calling it good news anyway, especially with one of our most important events, MANTS, coming up.

The Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show is one of very few green industry conventions left that has a waiting list for booth rentals. Like so many other gatherings, large and small and in-between, it didn't happen in 2020. I think we're all rarin' to go from virtual back to f2f, but I suspect many—me, for instance—are also still a bit nervous.

As I type, the Baltimore Convention Center is abiding by all state and city regulations, which currently include mandatory mask usage by all exhibitors, attendees and staff. The eyebrow-raising, nervous-making news? A year ago, that same building was unavailable for MANTS or any other event, even if such gatherings had been legal, because the city was using it as an overflow COVID-19 hospital with 250 beds. It served about 1,500 patients. That use closed in June. As I type, less than two months from opening day, the building has been thoroughly cleaned and sanitized, with upgraded air filters. It's still a site for testing, vaccinations and antibody infusions.

In the aforementioned study, nobody defined exactly what "essential daily activities" a trade show is safer than. It probably includes going to the office, grocery shopping, sitting in meetings, dining at restaurants, renting a car, pumping gas or plugging in your hybrid, or staying at a hotel—most of which activities are involved in attending trade shows.

Despite some lingering uneasiness, I'll be there. And I hope to see you there, too. We all have that axe to grind, don't we?

In the unlikely event that I lock myself out of my car, I won't call a locksmith. I'll just find the nearest squirrel and tell him there's a stash of sunflower seeds in the console. He'll find a way in. **GP**

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