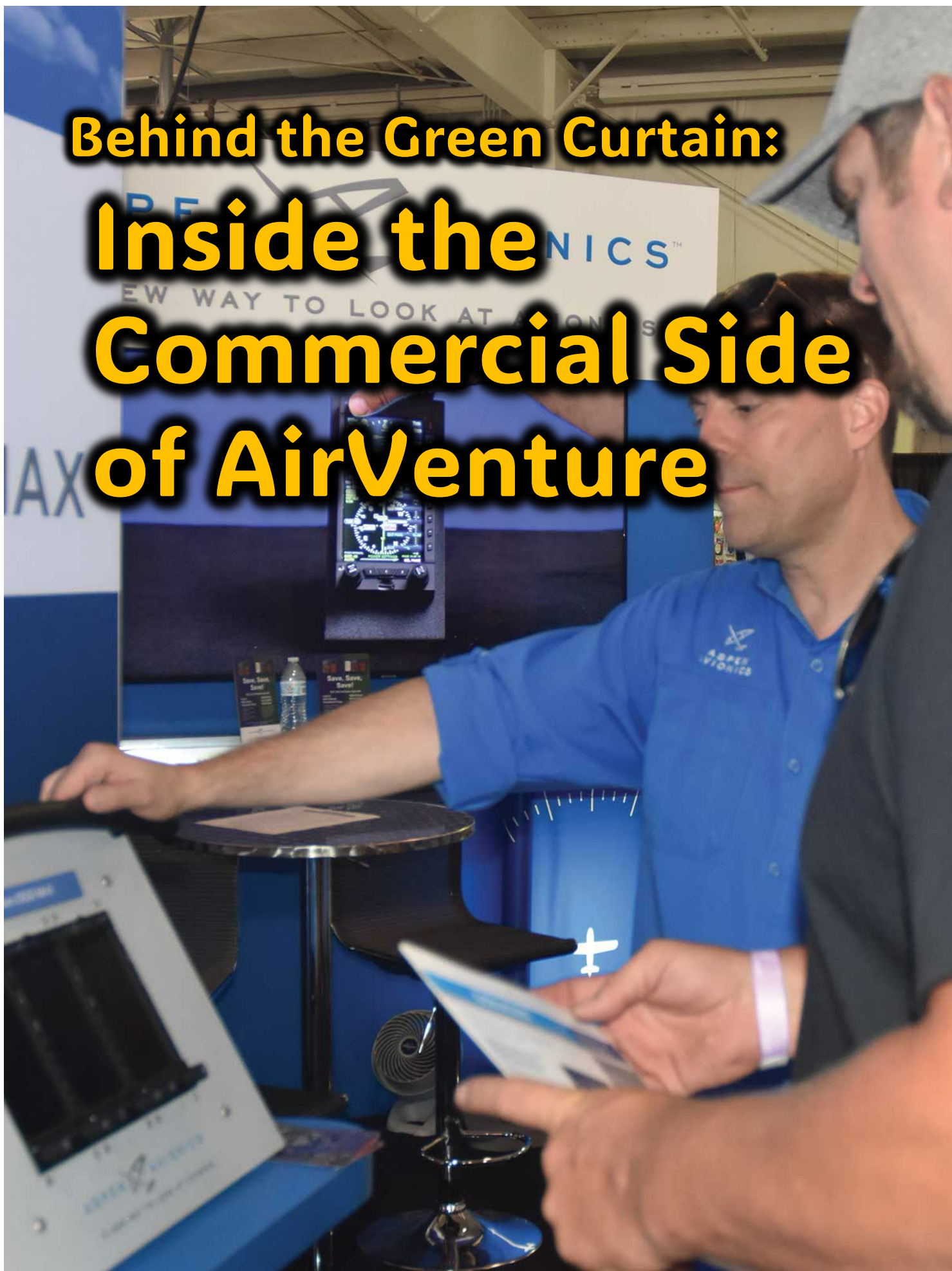


Behind the Green Curtain: Inside the Commercial Side of AirVenture



Inside the Commercial Side of AirVenture

By Mike Jones

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In the midst of all the noise and propellers and such, it's hard to remember that AirVenture is a for-profit event sponsored by the EAA. EAA uses those funds to pay for all the good work it does during the rest of the year. The numbers are huge: I estimate that EAA generates \$26 million in ticket sales and another \$16 million in retail booth rentals. Then there are \$150+/week camping fees for either your airplane or the thousands of RVs at Camp Scholler, commercial sponsorships ("Boeing Plaza" isn't a coincidence), special events charges (movie tickets, helicopter rides and on and on) and fees for just about anything a person does except breathe and poop. EAA doesn't even pay the airshow performers for their flights, which is another way to save a few shekels.

Which raises an interesting question — how does a company justify the expense to exhibit at AirVenture?

Case Study: Aspen Avionics

Aspen Avionics is a classic example. Aspen is one of the smaller avionics companies but makes terrific products that out-perform many of the biggest names. They are particularly popular with the home-built market but their products are STC-approved all the way to King Airs and more. Aspen has been

at every AirVenture since the company was founded. In addition to their handsome booth in Hangar B they also host a hospitality tent right next to the show entrance at the North 40. It was at this tent I met Ms. Perry Coyne, director of Marketing at Aspen. While drinking Aspen's beer and eating a marvelous outdoor Mexican buffet dinner I pestered her with questions about the economics of the whole process.



Coyne is not your classic briefcase-toting marketing guru. Petite and feisty, she's a Southern California girl who's first job was in the Coast Guard, including a stint in Washington, DC as a congressional affairs liaison. Her job was to twist arms in Congress for funding for critical services like search and rescue, law enforcement, human trafficking and drug interdiction. Exiting the service, she found a marketing job at Signature Flight Support, then Garrett and then Honeywell. She's been with Aspen for nine years.

Which brings me back to the original question: How does a smallish-company justify the huge investment in AirVenture?

"It's all about relationships," she said. "We're investing in relationships with people like the Cessna group, and Bonanzas, and home builders. A face-to-face show like this is the only place to do it."

She explained that Aspen's mission isn't just to sell boxes but to create options for pilots when they're deciding on the new equipment into their airplanes.

"We know that writing a \$10,000 check isn't easy, so we always try to make the customer happy, no matter what," she explained. "We want to make our products easy to own, easy to install, easy to upgrade. Our goal, our culture at Aspen is so that every customer walks away feeling they made the right decision going with Aspen. And then we build on that."

Dealing with Competitors

I asked about the competition: Honeywell, Garmin, and all the others; ferociously competitive big names and big money.



Aspen technical expert Mike Studley (blue shirt) chats with a client at the Aspen booth.

"Selling stuff at the airshow is a must; if you're not selling how do you justify the expense? That's why we have a booth, right across from some of our best dealers," she

pointed out. "But airshows will remain. We're a Silver Sponsor of the Oshkosh show, it's the single biggest line item in our entire budget. And that doesn't count [the costs of] the exhibit space, the set-up, trucking, hotels and everything. For this party, we have to buy our beer from EAA. It's \$4 a beer for

each Miller Light, and \$5 for each Modelo.” I felt guilty about my glass of red wine.

“We spent a bucket of money [on the open house party] but we have a very specific goal. It exemplifies who we are as a company. We don't care if you have an Aspen or not,” she explained earnestly. “If you want to come in [to their tent] and push some buttons, get a bottle of water, have a taco, shelter from a storm, or just take a load off your feet — who are they going to remember when they start looking at avionics again? We begin to craft a relationship with those people. They have an opportunity to experience Aspen in terms of who we are as a brand and a team.”

I asked Coyne about the details; how does one set up a party like this?

“Last night: I was scared to death,” she said. She was planning for 150 people, and after the invitations were sent she received almost 500 RSVPs. “OMG, what am I going to do? So I called the catering company, ordered more food, more beer and wine, and prayed it didn't rain. It turned out great. The one comment I have heard again and again was, thank goodness, you didn't have bratwurst again.”

Coyne estimated that at least 300 people showed up for the open house, and many of those looked closely at the airplanes and avionics on display.

“Those are all Aspen-equipped airplanes parked out here. We opened the airplanes, powered them up, and let people see the equipment. We brought our social media influencers who can explain the capabilities of the system. People were crawling around, very involved, looking at the planes and configurations.”

To my eyes, Aspen seems very involved, very engaged and very professional. But Coyne took me down a different path: “We're also very kind,” she said. “That's one of our core values. We know that if we treat people with respect they'll return that respect. You can't go wrong with that.”

Coyne was equally ebullient in her endorsement of the Aspen team: their sales people and field engineers are all pilots.



Antique and homebuilt aircraft are prime candidates for an Aspen upgrade. This is a Cessna 170A, made in 1950 and flown to the show from its home in upstate New York. It takes days of relentless effort to keep the aluminum shiny must. Don't drool.

“They don’t just talk about the products. They ask the right questions like, what's your mission, where are you flying? What type of airplane? How many hours are you flying? And they'll offer Aspen as a better option for that customer's budget and mission.”

Working the Booth

Over in Hangar B, I chatted with Charlie Reiche, an Aspen field service engineer with a deep background in autopilots. He supports customers from Texas and north, plus Australia and a little bit of Asia. He insists he is not a sales guy.

“I'm a service guy. I like interacting with people. I'm asking what kind of airplane they have, how they are equipped,” he said, unknowingly corroborating Coyne's earlier comments. “I offer my best take on the optimal combination of their equipment and our equipment, how it would play together, and what would work well for them.”

Reiche is particularly good at working with dealers on third-party autopilot issues. Aspen doesn't make an autopilot, but he said, “We're in the autopilot age now. What kind of new, cost-effective autopilots can we link to, like Garmin, and S-Tec, and Trio, and True Trak, and Bendix King? They're evolving, and we're evolving new functionality so we can plug-and-play with almost all of them.”

The biggest plus for owner-pilots is the upgradeable design of the Aspen products. “You can begin with an E5, and then migrate to a ProMax or an MFT, and even add software options,” Reiche said. “We're not like some companies that say oh you've got the old one; you have to buy a whole new one. We keep it flexible for customers.”

Also in the booth was Mike Studley, another avionics expert who has been with Aspen since 2008. He reported they'd had a great show. “Monday to Wednesday, we were wall-to-wall with people, all day long,” he reported. Their main job at the booth is to build demand on behalf of the Aspen dealers. “If there's somebody looking to place an order right now we'll send them across the aisle to one of our distributors here.”

Studley's comment highlighted an interesting marketing twist; they're not just here to speak with end-users but also to cultivate their dealer team. Aspen meets many end-users during their year-long show schedule which starts with Sun-n-Fun, AirVenture, the Aircraft Electronics Association show, and regional shows. But the face-to-face time with dealers may be even more crucial.

“We get out [of the booth] and talk to our dealers,” Reiche agreed. “We can fix almost anything over the phone, especially with Facetime and video chats. But my dealers are my hands and my eyes. I love to see them at these shows.” He pointed across the aisle at three large booths. “These three shops — Gulf Coast Avionics, Pacific Coast, and Sarasota Avionics — are among the three best dealers in the industry. It’s great to support them here.”

As glamorous as it sounds, Reiche explained that AirVenture is hard duty.

“They’re double-long days, because we spend half the day here at the booth but the other half is back at our rented house, doing [customer] support,” Reiche elaborated. “We’re answering emails, taking phone calls. The sales guys say, hey, I’m done for the day, I’m going to go play golf. But we’re in Support, and customers are waiting. It turns into long days.”

About the Author

Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has more than 50 aircraft types in his logbook. His pride and joy is a Cessna T210, which has carried him to every corner of the U.S. and Canada for more than twenty years. He’s always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

