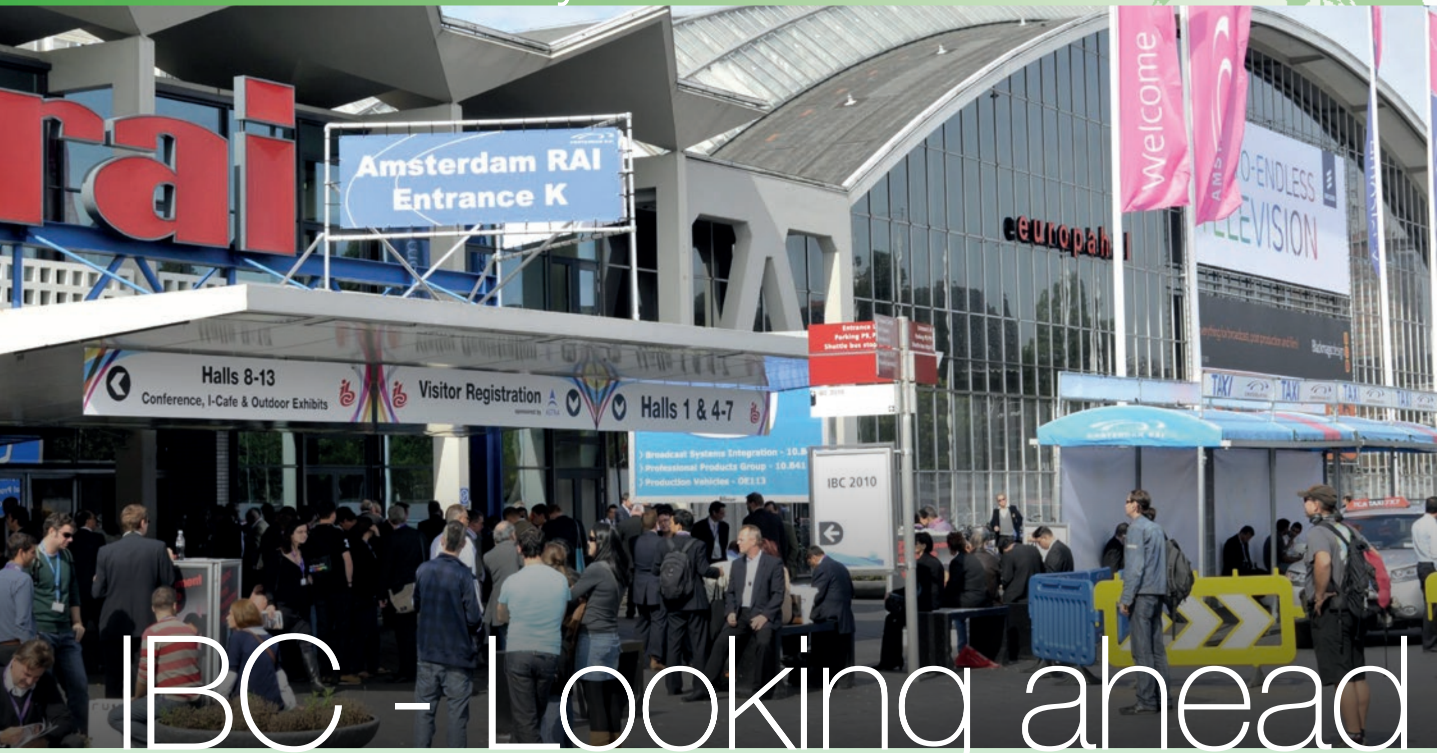

IBC - Looking ahead

with a nod to the past

By Melissa Cogavin, Managing Editor, SCTE

After a long and frustrating three years IBC is at last back at the RAI in Amsterdam. Europe's largest broadcast conference and exhibition, the show has endured a period of being unable to plan and in a business characterised by forward planning, that is not a comfortable place to be. Now that the show is confirmed, it has certainly added to a sense of confidence across the industry that life is returning to normal. Melissa Cogavin caught up with IBC's CEO Mike Crimp to find out the show is looking for September, as well as a look at how the show has evolved over the years.

Mike Crimp
CEO, IBC

Over a coffee and a Zoom call, Mike Crimp was happy and relaxed. He was keen to tell me what the show was going to look like, as well as stress that the recovery is dependent on the confidence of people returning after Covid, as restrictions and attitudes cover a broad spectrum.

"It is more about the human side, reassuring people who worry about the element of risk involved. Our responsibility is keeping people informed so that they can make their own judgment, and reminding them that we're doing everything we can to keep people safe." He went on, "I would urge those who are undecided to look closely at what we're doing, because it's going to be very valuable. Apart from the 12 halls, there's going to be a lot of interesting content as well."

I wanted to hear how the show had evolved over the years, so that whatever is coming in 2022 made sense. Mike explained the show's ethos first.

"IBC is all about different kinds of delivery," he began. "When I first started in the early 2000s, we knew there were going to be four screens in the future; the cinema screen, TV screen, the computer screen and the mobile screens which were in their infancy. The way forward then was to be agnostic about what the use of those screens were."

"Screen resolution was getting better and cheaper, regardless of size. TV at the time was just digital terrestrial. So we embraced cable and satellite, followed by mobile and telco. We also saw that people wanted to talk about the creation, management and delivery of content rather than just broadcast. So, at one end we had all the screens, and at the other we had all the delivery mechanisms covered. And in the

middle; focus would switch from the screens to HD 4K to the delivery method."

Mike added, "5G will be a big thing this year. And the cloud for business. Media workflows and how AI can be used to to help in everything all the way through the production chain. Those are the themes in 2022."

Given the size of the show it must be a challenge to stay on top of the trends when everything is moving so fast. Mike smiled. "It can be! We've got a session which is cheekily entitled, The Future of Linear, which looks at the various new business models that have emerged of late. Not that long ago there was a clear terrestrial broadcast model, which was paid ads. There was a clear satellite and cable model, which was subscription based with satellite box. And then OTT came along. But now actually we are seeing all these different models, where everyone's monetising the content they've paid so much to produce that they've become more agnostic. Amazon don't mind if they've got free-to-consume stuff, as it has ads in it. This would've been quite confusing not that long ago."

Mike explained the level of debate around that central area will focus on enabling these new models rather than running a legacy system for broadcast. "There will be less focus on delivery and display as well as how technology and the cloud can be used." He went on, "5G enables so much - the Metaverse for a start. It enables people to set up very small broadcasts very easily and very quickly. So that will be interesting because no one's discussed it for two- or three-years face to face. Remote production has become a theme now, through necessity during the pandemic."

He also pointed out that "So many big companies now want to differentiate themselves. It isn't enough to just have a logo on the kit anymore. They need to have a narrative around why they're here and what's different. Amazon is making big noises in this area – the why behind the what is a big selling point in 2022. We've got a showcase theatre, which will be exploited by lots of companies telling a story, rather than just showing black boxes."

Trade shows can suffer from being a bit samey after a while; there are only so many black boxes you can get excited about. It is broadly reflective of the industry that lines are blurring and the protectionist attitude that once prevailed is giving way to something more inclusive, I ventured. "Absolutely," Mike agreed. "We have a number of companies that are very good at providing an end-to-end solution all the way along the supply chain. But from a broadcast point of view, the cloud allows you to be scalable."

How does that impact business as whole? "If you've got a lot of subscribers and you've got a lot of content, you can go up and down. On the buying side, it's less about buying all the black boxes up front and plugging together as a capital expenditure. Things have morphed into a subscription model now. Instead of supplying black boxes to customers, the customers are driving it and asking for the subscription to the software." Subscription models are something everyone is already using more than they realise, whether it is for Netflix, their online newspaper or dog food via Amazon. It is good for cashflow.

Mike added, "We have seen a lot of the industry therefore has had to move from a CAPEX model to an OPEX one."

I asked Mike how IBC managed the communications during the pandemic, as the show faced one cancellation after another. It must have been tough going at times.

"At IBC we are experts at booking, running a show, keeping it relevant and growing it, but suddenly it had to be cancelled. We had to become experts at cancelling the show. Which was a very different thing. If you even think about all the systems, the CRMs and things you use to run a show and your accounting and booking system, they're not designed to cancel things.

That must have extremely challenging at a time when the world seemed to be coming to an end. We can all remember how impossible it was to predict even a month ahead. "Exactly," Mike answered. "IBC is owned by six trade bodies; most of them have charitable status. One of the advantages of having all the different partners is that they can help us facilitate and to sense check our responses to the industry and then adjust them, which is the way we got through it."

I wonder what Mike's fondest memories were, given that he has been with IBC for a long time. How has the show developed over the years?

"Prior to my joining IBC was already looking to move out of Brighton, where it hosted a show every other year. They had a competitor in Montreux in Switzerland doing much the same on alternate years. IBC at the time was quite visionary. They recognised that Brighton didn't have the scale it needed for the show to develop at the same rate as the industry it served; it didn't have the venue, the hotels or the transport links. The same issue was facing the organisers of the Montreux show.

"They bravely moved the show to Amsterdam for all sorts of logistical and business reasons, but they also tackled their competition head on and increased the frequency to an annual show. Out of that I learned that you have to be bold in business for the good of the industry. I watched them go through that challenge and make those decisions.

Mike concluded, "In 1993, Montreux happened again and people made a direct comparison. It took a few years but eventually IBC won out as the show had grown so big it made no sense to continue."

It's always the people that create the memories. "I've made lots of friends and so many memories. So I'd imagine everybody else who goes there is the same, it's a great place. I have to say the only the overriding memory for me was 9/11 and that happened on the setup day of IBC. I was walking around the show and watching the planes fly into the buildings. A lot of us just didn't take notice because we thought it was people testing the screens for some Hollywood movie effects type and we just didn't get it."

Presumably there were a lot fewer people that year because flights were grounded? Mike said that was the case, but people still made a gigantic effort to get to Amsterdam in spite of the pervading shock and fear. "Even from the US, people still managed to find their way there and come and support the show. Especially Americans. I think there was a speech from President Bush, which said about carrying on with life, and that resonated at the time. So my memories aren't just about the fun part. Out of that adversity, it was quite something seeing the industry pull together like that."

In terms of future proofing, do you have any sort of sense of how you might handle any further disruptors? It is anyone's guess at this point what shape they might take.

Mike laughed. "That's the problem, isn't it? We have operational plans for a whole number of scenarios. We're very professional about that. When you cancel something because of a crisis event like COVID-19, all those contracts stayed in the drawer gathering dust, because they become irrelevant at the point something transformational happens. It's about listening, partnership."

Which brings us back to Mike's first point about risk. Mike replied, "Yes. When something's absolutely blown out of the water, the first response is to ensure that we're all in this together. Because then we come out the other side of it all together. And that makes us stronger."

For more information, see https://show.ibc.org/