Early 40 SEMA-member companies traveled together to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as part of the fifth SEMA Middle East business development program. The companies included manufacturers of engine performance, suspension, interior and exterior products and those whose products are used for racing, street performance and off-road as well as for classic cars, restoration and hot rods. The group was in the Middle East to learning about the local specialty-equipment market firsthand, tazweed style (Arabic for customization).

As with other SEMA overseas business development programs in China, Russia and Australia, the recent Abu Dhabi-based program was designed to provide participants with an understanding of the vehicle customization market, including which vehicles are the most popular to modify as well as information about the local racing and off-road scenes.

“These international trips are designed to create new opportunities for SEMA members,” explained Peter MacGillivray, SEMA vice president for events and communications. To that end, the program also included one-on-one meetings with pre-vetted buyers, intended to lead to new business.

“Participation was excellent this year and gave the attendees a great opportunity to share their passion with top-tier custom, racing and performance businesses in the Middle East,” said Wade Kawasaki, CEO of Coker Tire and chair-elect of the SEMA Board of Directors. “It was another successful event, not only for creating new opportunities but also to gain the knowledge to create export-ready products for key markets.”

The delegation was comprised of both companies already doing some business in the area and those exploring the market with SEMA for the first time. Sean Crawford, director of marketing and business development for JE Pistons, observed that the trip is beneficial for those new to the market as well as for those looking to grow their existing business.

“If you are a manufacturer and have no distribution in the area, these trips are a no-brainer,” he said. “SEMA sets you up with prescreened buyers and gives you the opportunity to talk business. If you already have distribution in place, that’s even better. The program gives you the opportunity to go talk to your customers and see what really drives their businesses.”

The trip included four packed days that featured exhibiting at the Custom Show Emirates, visiting specialty-equipment installers, retailers and wholesalers, networking with buyers at more informal gatherings such as barbecues and karting, and participating in briefings by U.S. government officials in the area.

SEMA also sponsored an international measuring session as part of the program. The session featured six vehicles popularly customized in the region but not sold in the U.S., including Y61 and Y62 Nissan Patrols, older and current versions of Land Cruisers, and two versions of the popular overseas Ford Ranger. Delegation members were able to measure the vehicles both to design new products as well as to see if current products would fit one or more of the vehicles.

SEMA Garage staff members were also on hand at the sessions to create high-quality CAD designs that will be made...
available to SEMA members through the Tech Transfer program administered by the SEMA Garage.

The SEMA Middle East program and other business development programs are made possible through a partnership with the Market Development Cooperator Program (MDCP) of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

“We were able to speak with U.S. government officials from the embassies across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the U.S. Department of Commerce to gain key insights about their regions,” said Jack Tese, head of business development for Kooks Custom Headers Inc. “In addition to the financial support provided through the MDCP award, SEMA and the SEMA-member participants greatly valued the insight and technical support provided by the U.S. government. “The information was crucial to gaining a better understanding of doing business in each particular region as well as the requirements of exporting that can often be very complicated. It’s a much easier process to understand when you have one-on-one time with an expert who not only know the region’s complexities but also is familiar with the most prominent buyers and legal regulations.”

Liz Couch, a U.S. Department of Commerce official and the MDCP award’s team leader, traveled to the Middle East with SEMA.

“SEMA’s Middle East event offers a wonderful opportunity for U.S. specialty-parts companies to meet potential buyers, learn more about vehicle customization trends in these growth markets and gain understanding when you have one-on-one time with an expert who not only know the region’s complexities but also is familiar with the most prominent buyers and legal regulations.”

“I am sure every company that participated was very satisfied with the event as a whole,” said Erika Garcia (left), sales manager for BOLT Locks by STRATTEC. “Linda Spencer and the SEMA international team did an outstanding job. We participated in 2015 and again in 2016. Even though at first we were a little skeptical at the potential our BOLT products would have in the GCC countries, primarily because our target market is for pickups and SUVs. We were pleasantly surprised to see many of these vehicles on the streets in 2015, including Jeeps, Toyota Hiluxes and Land Cruisers. The Nissan SUV Patrol is also super popular, as are American pickups, including Chevy, GMC and Ford. We are now working with two distributors in the area and two retailers/installers. I definitely recommend this event to other companies that are planning for growing internationally.”

“The SEMA Middle East business development trip was excellent, as always,” said Josh Abbott (right), international sales manager for Borla Performance Industries. “It’s fascinating to witness this traditional and long-established culture fully embrace the personalization of its vehicles. This market rose in front of our eyes, and there is no collection of brands more sought-after by these local enthusiasts than those made by SEMA members. Establishing an effective international business strategy is a daunting task for small- and mid-sized businesses with limited resources, but SEMA has given its members a firm foundation to build on in this region and continues to provide great support to us manufacturers. We are looking forward to many more of these types of trips.”
access to the relevant information needed to develop, produce and ultimately export customized parts for vehicles not sold in the United States,” Couch said. “In addition, the program’s networking events are an opportunity to build relationships with targeted buyers from the region as well as with fellow SEMA members. My colleagues from the U.S. Embassies in the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and I are pleased to participate in this program and support SEMA’s and its members’ efforts to increase U.S. exports to this region.”

SEMA News spoke with delegation members concerning their observations about the market and its potential for their companies and SEMA members in general. The group left the UAE with overwhelming optimism, and all of them said that they planned to actively pursue business in the region within the next 12 months. Following are some of their comments about what drives their enthusiasm for the region.

**Vehicles on the Road**

“We were pleasantly surprised at the diversity of automobiles, including classic and collectible cars, hot rods, musclecars, trucks, jeeps, passenger cars and even motorcycles.”

—Dave Edmondson, senior vice president of Roadwire Inc.

“Most of the modified vehicles seen on the roads of Abu Dhabi and Dubai were American vehicles—specifically Jeep Wranglers, late-model GM trucks and late-model American musclecars.”

—Justin Hartenstein, president of Oracle Lighting

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—Erika Garcia, sales manager for BOLT Locks
“Driving down the highway in the UAE feels very much like the U.S. You see a great deal of the same vehicles we see in the states. That gives me confidence about the market potential.”
—Troy Wirtz, director of aftermarket sales for Dee Zee Inc.

“I knew that the Land Cruiser 200 Series was popular in UAE, but I didn’t realize that every third car on the road was a white 200 Series Land Cruiser. As expected, Toyota and Nissan dominated, but I was surprised to see many GM and Jeep vehicles as well.
—Carl Montoya, primary for Nitro Gear & Axle

“There are applications that are unique to this market, but we also found that our existing products can be sold in this market.”
—Sean Crawford, director of marketing and business development for JE Pistons

“Visiting the shops firsthand, I could see that they do like to customize vehicles just like we do in the U.S. I could see by the vehicles on the road that the market is full of opportunities.
—Scott Majors, director of sales aftermarket for Putco Inc.

“We saw a variety of vehicles on the road, including American makes and models. It appears that this trend is growing within the Middle East.”
—Troy Hooker, sales manager for Edelbrock

Extent of Customization

“There was a lot of tasteful customization and lots of over-the-top huge turbos on Nissan Patrols and Land Cruisers. Rev limiters were popping all day and night in the drifting section. This market craves performance and is not afraid to burn some fuel. The market potential is huge. There are lots of performance and off-road enthusiasts with plenty of money to spend.”
—Carl Montoya, primary for Nitro Gear & Axle

“What has become more evident is how much more popular car performance and

—Carlos Herrera (right), marketing manager for Extreme Dimensions Inc., traveled with SEMA for the first time this year. Half of the SEMA delegation was returning to the market, with the remainder of the companies exploring the region for the first time.

—I would highly recommend that any company currently doing international business or with plans to develop an international presence consider getting involved in one or more of the SEMA international trips,” said Jeff Jenkins (center), president of Fidanza Performance. “The experience is not only eye-opening, but it also brings a much more intimate understanding of the country and the people as well as doing trade at an international level. There is a difference in doing business with partners in other countries compared to working with distribution partners in the states. The level of trust, both ways, is very important, and there is no better way of building that trust than meeting personally with the people who are going to be representing your products in another land.”

The Middle East SEMA event was a success for us,” said Melanie White (second from left), vice president of Hellwig Products. “This was the second time we attended the SEMA Middle East program. We walked away with many leads for buyers and are currently in the process of following up with them.” Joining Hellwig on the trip was Mark Hallmark (center), the company’s international sales manager.

“Walking the show the first two days before the SEMA area opened was very fruitful,” said Robert Scheid (second from left), director of business development for McLeod Racing. “I was able to meet with many of the local car clubs and talk to car owners at CSE.”

“I knew that the Land Cruiser 200 Series was popular in UAE, but I didn’t realize that every third car on the road was a white 200 Series Land Cruiser. As expected, Toyota and Nissan dominated, but I was surprised to see many GM and Jeep vehicles as well.
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international modifications have become in not only the UAE but also in the other GCC Countries.
—Kevin Floody director of international sales for aFe Power–Advanced Flow Engineering

 “[We saw] functional modifications on many off-road vehicles that were purpose-built for attacking sand dunes, as well as track cars that appeared to be very capable race cars.”
—Justin Hartenstein, president of Oracle Lighting

“The SEMA Middle-East business development trip was excellent, as always. It’s fascinating to witness this traditional and long-established culture so in love with the personalization of its vehicles.”
—Josh Abbott, international sales manager for Borla International Performance Industries

Buyer Interaction

“The buyers we met with in the UAE were serious buyers and were mostly the decision makers for their companies. I think there is an assumption of an awkward interaction due to cultural differences, but it was no different than meeting buyers in the U.S. All of the buyers were very professional and polite. Everyone we met with seemed to already understand our product line. They had done research, which made the entire process very easy. The UAE region has a positive perspective for U.S.-made parts and vehicles. Many of the residents in the UAE have disposable income to put into vehicle builds and mods.”
—Justin Hartenstein, president of Oracle Lighting

“There is no language barrier, as almost all of the people I communicated with spoke both Arabic and English. Meetings with both existing and potential new customers were very productive, and it was a great way to strengthen relationships.”
—Troy Wirtz, director of aftermarket sales for Dee Zee Inc.

“The UAE trip is really going to elevate our business in that region. The buyers that we met at the show were eager and willing to do business. We generated a lot of good leads, and

—Jack Tese (second left), business development for Kooks Custom Headers Inc., and Chris Clark (third from right), sales director, also met with buyers. “The SEMA Middle East trip was very beneficial to Kooks’ international development in more ways than we ever anticipated,” Tese said. “It’s not often you get to meet with preselected buyers from the top performance facilities all over the region in both business and casual settings.”

—One Crowd Investment CEO Sunny Leung (right) demonstrated the company’s dashcams to an interested buyer.
I’m very optimistic that we will close some deals. Since returning home, two prospects I met during the trip have already reached out to me. When I have that type of response before I have even generated my follow-up letters, it tells me that it was a successful trip.”

—Scott Majors, director of sales aftermarket for Putco Inc.

“It’s a growing market, and there is tons of opportunity, whether you are on the accessory side or the engine performance side like Comp Performance. You need to come and build the relationships. There is a lot of potential here. There is a young demographic here that bodes very well for the future.”

—Chris Douglas, vice president of marketing for COMP Performance Group

“The Custom Show Emirates really highlighted the passion for motorsports and customizing in the Middle East, and the buyers who attended the show had great interest in our products. It is going to be a fast-growing marketplace for SEMA-member companies.

—Lake Speed Jr., general manager of Driven Racing Oil LLC

“It was really encouraging to see how many young car guys were involved and excited about modifying their cars with our members’ products.”

—Wade Kawasaki, president and COO of Coker Group and chair-elect of the SEMA Board of Directors

Why Travel to the Middle East

“Going to the UAE gives a sense to the customers that we are committed and serious about doing business in the region.”

—Scott Majors, director of sales aftermarket for Putco Inc.

“The only way to understand this region is to go there yourself. Talk to business owners, talk to consumers and form your own opinions. We can’t successfully run our manufacturing business and plan our company’s future based on hearsay and opinions from others.”

—Steve Whipple, vice president of sales for Edelbrock

“While our company is currently conducting business in the region, I came away from the trip knowing that we can do much better

—Scott Majors (right), director of aftermarket sales for Putco, said that going to the UAE gives customers the sense that the company is committed and serious about doing business in the region. “Visiting the shops firsthand, I could see that they do like to customize vehicles just like we do here in the United States,” he said. “I could see by the vehicles on the road that the market is full of opportunities.”

—Scott Majors (left), president of Pittman Outdoors, demonstrated the company’s custom-designed air mattress, which is specifically made to fit in the bed of pickups.

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“The sales and business opportunities in the Middle East were well beyond our expectations,” said Dave Edmondson (left), senior vice president of Roadwire Inc., who was joined by John Marsh (right), the company’s new business development manager. “The enthusiasm, professionalism and attentiveness of the vetted buyers set up for SEMA members was extremely encouraging and will lead to revenue increases for our subsidiaries as well as the other attending SEMA-member businesses. The tours, events and conference were very well planned, fun and targeted at our interests and business.”

Faye An (center), vice president of Seibon Carbon, answered questions posed by pre-vetted buyers to the trade-only SEMA section of CSE.

Participating SEMA companies exhibited for two days at CSE. The first day was trade buyers only, while the SEMA section was also open to trade and consumers on the second day. Attending for SLP were Anthony Marszalek (third from right), director of sales, and Matthew Hansen (far right), internal international sales.

Trade buyers attended the SEMA program from 10 countries in the region, including buyers traveling to the event from Egypt and India. Attending from SEMA-member company SuperATV were Vice President Lindsey Hunt (second from right) and National Sales Manager Stephen Sheets (third from left).

Billy Waldoch (center), general manager of Waldoch Crafts Inc., talked with buyers at the second CSE.

Warrior Products was one of nearly 40 SEMA-member companies traveling to the UAE to meet one-on-one with buyers and learn about opportunities for their products in the region. Pictured here is Thomas Richardson (second from right), the company’s president and CEO.

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if we simply put a little focus there. I had the opportunity to connect with qualified buyers via shop visits and displaying within the SEMA section of the Custom Show Emirates. My company made many legitimate business contacts throughout the week that I’m confident will lead a substantial expansion of our business in the UAE market.”

—Chris Douglas, vice president of marketing for COMP Performance Group

“The experience is not only eye-opening, but it also brings a much more intimate understanding of the county and the people as well as doing trade at an international level. There is a difference in doing business with partners in other countries compared to working with distribution partners in the states. The level of trust, both ways, is very important, and there is no better way of building that trust than meeting personally with the people who are going to be representing your products in another land.”

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—Jack Tese, business development for Kooks Custom Headers Inc.

“One of the best parts is seeing the high interest level in American brands and American-made products. The level of retail presence has also taken off, and many of these establishments are done up very nicely. The interactions with the various customers have been great. Everywhere we went and everyone we met were tremendous.

—Kevin Floody, director of international sales for aFe Power—advanced FLOW engineering

Opportunity to Connect With U.S. Delegation Members

“The participating SEMA members became a close-knit group throughout the week and built great relationships that I’m sure will lead...
“With such a diverse collection of exhibiting companies from so many segments of our market, everyone was interested in learning about each other and our respective companies. We were able to spend quality time together as exhibitors, allowing for the start of some very strong business networking connections that will last a lifetime.”

—Jeff Jenkins, president of Fidanza Performance

“Getting to spend time in an informal atmosphere with peer companies, Department of Commerce staff and SEMA staff was a big bonus on this trip.”

—Jim Chick, director sales and marketing for Bestop Inc.

In addition to the annual business development program in the Middle East SEMA organizes similar programs in China, Russia and Australia. For more information, contact Linda Spencer at lindas@sema.org or visit www.sema.org/international.

Jim Moore, SEMA senior director of OEM relations, and Matt Cordato, SEMA vehicle product data specialist, were on hand to assist SEMA members in measuring the vehicles and to scan the vehicles with the highly accurate FaroArm.

Lisa Chissus (left), president and owner of Flex-a-lite, Craig Chissus, owner, measured a Land Cruiser at the second Middle East international vehicle measuring session. “The SEMA Middle East experience allows manufacturers to meet one-on-one with existing customers as well as new ones from many countries, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia and India,” said Lisa Chissus. “It also provides access to popular vehicles used in these countries so that aftermarket manufacturers can verify product fitment. Flex-a-lite has participated in this event for three years and has found it to be a valuable use of our time.”