BOEING ENTERS 2016 ON HEELS OF LATE ORDER SURGE

News / Manufacturer

As 2015 came to a close and Boeing shut its factory doors for a traditional 10 days' respite, the year's jetliner sales tally fell decidedly in favor of archrival Airbus, as the European manufacturer claimed sales of 1,007 airplanes for the year. But Boeing continued to push skyward, registering orders for another 166 airplanes in late December and raising its 2015 total to 843. Take into account cancellations and Boeing's net orders for delivery dropped by 100. Although single-aisle activity accounted for much of the order imbalance, Boeing 737 Max vice president and general manager Keith Leverkuhn wouldn't let questions about the sales lead the Airbus A320neo enjoys over the Max dampen enthusiasm for the latest 737 variant during its December 8 rollout in Renton, Washington.

"Look, [Airbus] got an 18-month head start on us with their introduction of the A320neo," he told reporters on the factory floor as workers tested the newly installed main landing gear on the second 737 Max, 1A002. "They gained orders early. By the time we launched, we were very comfortable with the way the marketing [settled] in terms of [the share] being about fifty-fifty."

Boeing introduced the Max in front of thousands of employees, but relatively few members of the media—more than eight years after the decidedly high-profile unveiling of the Boeing 787 Dreamliner. The difference between the two airplanes' respective rollouts reflected the company's effort to project an all-business approach to producing the first new 737 variant in 19 years, renewing its focus on getting the job done rather than the pomp and ceremony that went along with the Dreamliner's introduction.

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Accompanied by live music, an assemblage of celebrities and a worldwide video feed, the 787 rolled out with great fanfare on July 8, 2007. But after a series of production problems and delivery delays, Boeing didn't manage to deliver the first Dreamliner to launch customer All Nippon Airways until Sept. 25, 2011.

Unwilling to risk any repeat of past mistakes, the company adopted a policy coined "Right at First Flight" to govern the rollout of the 737 Max, said Leverkuhn.

"That's the idea of making sure that the systems and how they're put together have been thoroughly tested so that not only do we know how they're going to function, but we have an indication of just how reliable they're going to be," he stressed. "Since May, our 737 Max team has met all the milestones set for the program, including wing loading, power on, rollout; all have been on time. I'm very proud of the team."

The 737 Max test program will be the most rigorous the company has ever undertaken, according to Leverkuhn, who set a goal to fly the first of four Max testbeds in early 2016.

"Then we'll start 'clearing the envelope,'" he said. "We'll start by flying low and slow to make sure we understand the handling characteristics and that what we modeled in the wind tunnel was correct."

The testing program would then expand to include higher and longer flights, increasing speed and looking for flutter in the dynamic response of the aircraft.

In producing an aircraft that incorporates the extensive design changes mandated by the 737 Max program, Boeing is employing a lot of familiar faces. Some 80 percent of the assembly line workers putting together the Max have experience building the 737NG. For them, along with new hires, Boeing created a training laboratory complete with the tools and parts used for building the Max.

Despite Boeing's "Right at First Flight" mantra, the 737 Max won't enjoy complete immunity from some of the outsourcing problems that plagued its big brother, the 787. The Chicago-based company dropped GKN, the supplier of its titanium honeycomb inner walls of its thrust reversers, because it couldn't guarantee the parts in time once production ramps up to the projected 60 per month. GKN had produced between 30 and 40 of the titanium walls at its plant in Santa Ana, California, but expressed reservations about supplying the part in greater numbers.

Boeing managed to address the issue three weeks before the rollout of Aircraft 1A001 on December 8, however. It did not affect the flight-test time line, nor did it affect the first projected deliveries, scheduled for the third quarter of 2017.

While Boeing still plans to install the GKN-made titanium parts in the first few dozen Max aircraft, it has decided to replace them in production with more conventionally designed compressor walls made of carbon fiber, Leverkuhn said.

Boeing's plans to accelerate 737 production from today's rate of 42 a month to 47 in 2017 and 52 by the end of 2018.

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