32,169 visitors attended DSEi13, a rise of 13 per cent on the previous record in 2011. The exhibition featured 1,489 exhibitors, representing 54 countries, and included 40 international pavilions. 97 official delegations from 56 countries attended, marking a 30 per cent increase on DSEI 2011, while the number of additional VIPs who attended increased by 20 per cent to 1,034.

That is/was the "party line" from the organisers of DSEi before, during and after the show. But was it just "spin", quantity to obscure quality? That was the question I set out to answer as the DLR train drew into the Custom House station on the second day of the show.

(Actually, that's spin too. What I was really asking was – how's the security queue going to be, where are the protestors, and are there going to be any bacon buns left in the Media Centre. To which the answers were – a lot better than last time; and dunno, only a lone local with a handwritten sign on her back seen on the third day, when a bun was to be had).

An intrepid reporter wants the story on the record and from a senior source, so clearly there was no point in talking to the "big boys" at this stage. Fortunately, I'd arranged with two companies, one American, one British, to have frank discussions. What they told me, and what I concluded, can be found on the next page.

Both API and Kelvin Hughes were at DSEi 2011, and both had come back for more (and bigger) They'd put in a lot of people time over the last 12 months, as well as the cash for the stand, the stand design, travel and accommodation and so on.

They, and many others spoken to, think it's naïve to imagine you're going to go away from a show like this with a hatful of orders. "We're in a relationship driven business, the military and primes aren't going to buy from someone they've just met" was how Tara Flynn Condon, a Vice President of API Technologies Corp summed it up.

"We need a stand presence to launch ahead-of-the-game technology" say Mark Brown, Marketing Manager at Kelvin Hughes. "Our growth is going to come from new product development – our chief designer is a key company asset - and this is a cost-effective way to put the new and the upgraded in front of an international audience"
So this time they put a second storey on their stand, and worked hard with UKTI to make sure they had delegation visits. And it worked throughout the week – 10 on Tuesday, 9 on Wednesday, 7 on Thursday – the interview was interrupted to grab a Chilean Admiral who came onto the stand out of turn. Mark reckons half the people who dropped by were new to them, half were pre-existing contacts.

The company estimates its costs at £175,000 and its entire 15 strong sales staff was around for the show. Most importantly for them, they managed to leverage some of the delegation visits into flying visits to their factory at Enfield. DSEi is their biggest stand-alone effort – elsewhere they partner with other people.
Will you be back? Definitely, so long as the organisers and UKTI can keep delivering the goods.
Value for money? This year, it has been.
"This show is a draw" said Tara Condon. "The attention to detail is noticeable – and that's good, because that's what the boss sees and remembers – we made our decision for 2013 right after the 2011 show finished. We've had our quarterly management meeting over here at our Milton Keynes subsidiary, so all our senior people are here. It's so convenient."

As far as API is concerned, DSEi competes internationally, attracting senior decision makers, and enabling the company to launch new products like its Active Antenna Array Unit to the biggest possible relevant audience.

"It's difficult to put a price on building up a relationship," said Mark Willbourn, Marketing Director of BMT Nigel Gee. "The stand is a hook. We worked hard at getting delegations, and have had more than our fair share. But too much stand standing can be unproductive. That's why I get out and about too."

Mike Simms, who's been CEO at Altran UK for ayear after Paradigm, took a similar view. He didn't even have a stand – he was one of those 30,00 visitors, renewing old friends, making new

acquaintances amongst the rapidly-changing throngs by the coffee stands and impromptu end of the afternoon drinks gatherings at stands like NDI (with northern cheese nibbles too), Cohort and QinetiQ.

The "big boys" pretty much echoed all of this too. It was noticeable that organisers Clarion have been modifying the offering over the last few years. Security has become a bigger feature, as have the rolling mini-conferences (although the acoustics aren't great where auditoria have been fenced off in the north hall.)
Of course it needs to be stressed this isn't just a land systems event. The Chiefs of Staff of all three Services spoke and strolled, in addition to a clutch of Defence Ministers with their "purple" messages. The Royal Air Force was out en masse. Maybe they were doing half days – it's easy to jump on the Jubilee Line from Westminster to Canary Wharf. And there's no air display to punctuate every afternoon conversation.

Perhaps the biggest asset is the waterfront, and the demonstrations on non-tidal waters. Some of the ships tied up there can be seen on the Facebook pages of the U K Defence Forum.

Whatever the potential travails of other European defence shows, DSEi can retain its place on the major defence and security roster if it keeps doing what it's doing – providing a valued, efficient and pleasant market meeting place for global and local defence customers and suppliers.