

Attracting Young Professionals to Technical Conferences

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Young professionals – perhaps a significant majority of the readers of this magazine – do not seem to regularly participate in professional society work or attend technical conferences. We see mostly the older folks in meetings, though in some cases, students present papers or attend presentations. My primary goal here is to invite the younger generation to participate in technical activities. I use a Q & A format here on technical conferences, in the best tradition of journalistic or sports press conferences. I will pretend that a reader is asking questions and I will answer them in plain language.

Q: Let us start with the definition of a technical conference. What does it mean anyway?

A: A technical conference (it may be called a symposium, seminar, congress or colloquium) may be held on a relevant engineering or scientific topic of common interest (such as structural testing, modal analysis, noise control or shock and vibration). These are usually organized by professional societies or industry groups, such as the ASME, INCE, SAE, SEM, among many others. Sometimes, user conferences are arranged by software or instrumentation companies that lead to an improvement in the art and science of application.

Q: Why are you writing this editorial? Are you an expert on this topic?

A: I have chosen this topic to write about, since I am often asked questions about conferences. I have planned and managed several symposia and congresses. Plus, I have attended many conferences in my lifetime as author/presenter or session chair. This means that I have paid over \$40,000 in my lifetime in registration fees alone (not out of my pocket, thankfully). So at this point in my life, I could be labeled an ‘expert’ by now. Recently, I mentioned the conference issue to an industrial colleague (Dr. Bob) from a well known company in the Midwest. Bob says that he enjoys reading my editorials, and he thinks that this topic is timely.

Q: Are there too many conferences?

A: Some people think so. For example, confabb.com claims that there are more than 47,678 conferences (on all sorts of topics) in the world. I did quick research to see how many of those conferences cover topics that are of interest to readers of S&V. I counted at least 40 conferences. Some sites that maintain a calendar include icacommission.org/calendar.html and noiseboard.com, but one could easily find more information via internet searches or by asking senior colleagues. One could argue that we should encourage various organizers to get together and hold a “super bowl” on noise and vi-

bration, but it will probably never happen given parochial interests. My perspective is that large conferences become too impersonal and unmanageable with 15 or more parallel sessions. I was invited to participate in 20 conferences in 2007 alone, but I have managed to attend only four national and international conferences so far this year. I do not think I can afford any more this year. Plus, I still have to do my regular teaching work . . . though some claim that teaching is not really work.

Q: Are there exhibits on materials, instrumentation, software and so on?

A: Yes, many conferences have exhibits or ‘shows’ as long as there is a history of well-heeled attendees who like to purchase items. You may have noticed that S&V runs special issues on selected expositions.

Q: Are these conferences free? Do the organizers make money?

A: Not much is free in the world these days. Conferences charge registration fees to cover their costs like meeting rooms, registration space, meals, coffee breaks and so on. Some even organize dinner banquets, shows, cruises, etc. In some cases, admission to the exhibit space includes a nominal charge.

Most conferences make money – some quite a bit, depending on the number of registrants. Let us do some quick math. Assume that the registration fee is \$500 and 400 people show up. Thus, organizers have revenue of \$200,000. Often organizers assume risk in executing hotel contracts two to five years in advance, assuming some liability if attendance falls short of expectations. There is nothing wrong with making money. This way, the organizers will try to keep a lid on the fees of future meetings.

Q: What do I get out of the conferences while recognizing that I still have a busy work schedule?

A: Earlier this month, I asked some folks to answer this question. Some responses (based on a nonrandom sample) are as follows:

- “I got to hear about 50 papers on topics that are somewhat related to my work; I could not have read 50 papers on my own even in one year.”
- “I did not learn something new but my paper communicated the expertise my organization has, so I expect some new business.”
- “I come to the conferences for breakout sessions alone – I learn something from informal discussions.”
- “A great way to make friends and develop new contacts.”
- “This is indeed a vacation, paid for by my employer.”

- “I am hoping to land a job based on my article.”
- “I loved the exhibit but found the conference too technical.”
- “No one asked me a question, though I presented a wonderful paper; perhaps they did not understand it.”
- “We should have more users of the information and fewer disseminators of new knowledge.”
- “Nothing is new anymore, but it is good to hear the same stuff again.”
- “I have been managing both people and money, so this has been a refresher.”

Q: What happens if I go to a conference primarily to listen to just one or two presentations and the authors do not show up? Do I get my money back?

A: No-shows are problems in many meetings. Organizers try to minimize this problem by forcing the authors to pay the registration fees in advance, but sometimes authors still do not show up. You don’t get your money back, since you could attend many sessions, listen to other papers, and talk with other attendees. In fact, one could learn quite a bit by having conversations with experts and practitioners. Sometimes, they will tell you (in private) what does or does not work; though many are reluctant to write papers on failures.

Q: What should professional societies and conference organizers do to encourage the younger generation?

A: I suggest the following:

1. Make the technical program more exciting, and hold sessions for young engineers (including tutorials and demos).
2. Set up some inducements such as modest travel subsidy, best-presentation awards, and social programs for networking.
3. Get the younger generation involved in the organization and in behind-the-scene tasks.
4. Assign mentors to young professionals and create avenues of communication.

Q: Do you have other thoughts on the issues covered?

A: I think companies with the financial wherewithal should help create an atmosphere and culture where younger professionals are encouraged to make presentations and attend conferences. They can start slowly as coauthors at local association meetings, with the eventual goal of submitting their own papers to national conferences. Both employee and company will gain from the experience.

I have more thoughts, but time and space limitations demand that we terminate this session. Send me an e-mail at singh.3@osu.edu if you have questions or would like to share your concerns and suggestions. 