

Society-Sponsored Conferences--Who Needs Them?—By Robert L. Wernli

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involved development of advanced undersea vehicles and work systems during the past 26 years. Wernli is most noted for initiating new ventures with the Marine Technology Society, encouraging youth participation, and promoting technical communication and interaction within MTS. A Fellow of the society, he laid the foundation for 10 successful international ROV conferences from 1983 to 1992 and chaired all of them. An IEEE/OES member also, he chaired the Oceans 95 conference in San Diego and was technical program co-chair on Underwater Technology 98; he will do the same for the upcoming UT2000 conference in Tokyo, Japan.

Today, those of us working in the ocean industry—and also the inland waters—are faced with the usual: shrinking budgets, fierce competition, long hours, a search for time to breathe. However, we are also being swept up in a current of technological advancement never before experienced and are using this technology to promote our businesses, increase the bottom line, and even create new markets such as treasure hunting and archaeological investigations. With this as our stage, what is the role—and need—of the annual conferences sponsored by the professional societies? Or, for that matter, the MTS and IEEE/OES societies themselves?

What do the societies provide? They provide newsletters, technical journals, annual conferences, and proceedings that document the technology, workshops, local sections, student sections, scholarships, awards and the many intangibles. And, don't forget the networking made possible by the societies through their conferences and publications—a necessity in today's cutthroat competition to be number one. Without such networking—professional interaction and exchange—many of our careers would be quite different. I know I can speak for many in the industry when I say I would not have reached my level of career satisfaction without the aid of

society participation as either a member, officer, conference committee participant, or author/speaker.

Even more important is the fact that the societies are concerned with, and watching out for, our future. How? By working—and I mean working hard—at enticing our nation's youth to enter our industry, through student sections, student paper competition, student awards, student scholarships, and student cost breaks for registration and membership.

The societies and their networking provide the tools I—we—need to accomplish this satisfying task.

So, what's the problem? The problem is that the societies also have a bottom line. The costs of running a society, publishing, and providing the forums we need are not trivial. But, you reply, the conferences make a lot of money? Don't bet on it.

As an example, an Oceans XX type of conference relies on the exhibition to pay the bills. For every author who uses the forum to present his/her research, and with a subliminal marketing pitch, there are the costs of: printing and mailing the call for papers, advance and final programs, publishing the proceedings, and providing two lunches, one cocktail party, one dinner, coffee, and an author's breakfast. And, don't forget the video projectors, overheads, pointers, etc.

I have the numbers, but the bottom line is that an Oceans type conference loses money on every author. More authors, more bills. Furthermore, these conferences typically break even on attendees in order to keep the registration affordable.

So where's the income? Bottom line—from the exhibitors. They provide the needed "profit" for the society to remain in existence and provide the benefits previously discussed. In return, the exhibitors are provided with the opportunity to show their wares to the caliber of decision-makers represented by the conference speakers and attendees.

Thus, we arrive at the issue of conferences. MTS and IEEE/OES have responded to the strongly worded inputs from the ocean community—there are too many conferences. To foster cooperation and leverage limit-

ed resources, the annual conferences were recombined in 1995; the MTS ROV committee and ADC also combined conferences in 1993 to form Underwater Intervention. The Off-shore Technology Conference is also a prime example of many societies working together.

Now, new non-society trade shows are appearing. The number of conferences is again increasing. Why?

Maybe it's time for industry to listen to the societies—and provide feedback. The societies are there for you. If changes are needed to make conferences better, become proactive. The changes will be made. If the ocean community is not receiving increased value from the societies and their conferences, they need to know. Tell them. The societies are still listening.

And by all means, attend, support, and exhibit at these new "for profit" trade shows, if you can. They provide a service to the industry. But, please DO NOT remove your valuable support from the societies. If you choose to attend only a "for-profit" trade show, then how about supporting your society in a different manner. The annual cost of an exhibit booth, which provides the life blood of the society, is probably around 10 percent of your overall cost to exhibit after paying for the display, shipping, marketing handouts, labor, travel expenses, etc.

Support the societies that are helping shape our future. How? Consider the following. No, wait, I challenge you to DO the following: First of all, support the growth of our industry through participation in society-sponsored events. If you can't, then why not do this: • Become a corporate member, • Place an ad in a society publication, • Sponsor the coffee at a conference, • Provide a scholarship, • Provide a grant, or • Send attendees.

Better yet, do all of the above AND attend the annual, or other, society-sponsored conferences. Become active. Join or support the societies that have helped you and your corporation grow. Watch the bottom line, but don't ignore those who care about the industry's future—your future.

Society-sponsored conferences—who needs them? Professionals Do. You Do! /st/