

CONFERENCE VICE-PRESIDENT

THOMAS M. JORDAN



Conferences are one of SMPTE's primary sources of revenue. Annually the Society convenes twice: once in the winter for the Advanced Motion Imaging Conference and again in the fall for the Technical Conference & Exhibition. Events of September a year ago have had a devastating effect on attendance at all conferences and SMPTE is no exception.

The 2001 fall conference was the first to feel the effect. Attendance was very close to half of the planned number, which put us into a severe penalty situation with the New York Hilton Hotel. Fortunately, we were able to reach a very fair and equitable compromise with the Hilton folks, which greatly mitigated our potential financial pain. We were fortunate too that the sponsorships received from generous vendors, used to underwrite key events and conference materials, came in at the budgeted amount. On the expense side, increased emphasis was placed on cost containment because of previous unpleasant experiences. The net result was a conference that made a small amount of money but fell way short of the budgeted amount. This translates to a serious shortfall of revenue needed to operate the Society.

Immediately following the fall conference, we went to work reassessing our plan for the winter AMI Conference scheduled for Dallas in February—we knew that we couldn't withstand another attendance miss. Our meeting planner and executive director quickly met with representatives of the Dallas Fairmont Hotel and successfully renegotiated our contract minimums to levels we felt could be met, albeit not without a lot of promotional effort to encourage attendance. Under the direction of Editorial VP Ed Hobson, a dyn-o-mite program was organized and A-list presenters were secured. We were convinced that if the tutorial and sessions were relevant and of high quality, they would come. And they did. Not in the numbers that we had originally planned, but sufficient to make the conference a financial success.

Much of this success was the direct result of the local Dallas Section, and in particular, Charlie Pantuso who made it happen. Charlie and his band of hard-working volunteers were able to pull off a number of small miracles that significantly reduced our costs yet maintained the very highest quality presentations. For the record, we always depend on Section volunteers to assist our paid staff and contracted suppliers. Without them our conference costs would be even higher, and we are forever grateful for their help. We were fortunate that vendor sponsors signed up in sufficient numbers to underwrite some of the costs, and as a result, we slightly exceeded our sponsor budget.

So, what about future conferences? We firmly believe that SMPTE must continue to provide conferences as forums for leading industry participants to share ideas and technology and to interact with peers and all interested parties in a professional environment. However, we are keenly aware of the realities of today's business dynamics. Companies are cutting travel budgets and restricting employee activities to all but those necessary to support the immediate mission. In the view of many senior managers, conferences are high on the list of "unnecessary" activities. To reposition SMPTE conferences in the minds of those managers, we must deliver content that is relevant, easily accessible, and cost effective. The latter item is today's biggest challenge and the SMPTE executive committee and staff are working hard to address it. As costs continue to rise, we are aggressively seeking venues that will be more affordable to both SMPTE and conference attendees. Hotels that are willing to work closely with us on minimum room and catering commitments, room block rates and cutoff dates, complimentary services and space are our targets. Additionally, keeping the pressure on A/V expenses, advertising, and un-sponsored events will be essential to achieving our cost objectives. We know we can do it as evidenced by the Dallas AMI Conference. We will rely even more on sponsors and volunteers and strive to provide compelling content that will mitigate managers' reluctance to approve conference attendance. After all, it's all about "attendance" isn't it?

Your input and suggestions about SMPTE conferences are always welcomed and encouraged. Please contact us at conferences@smppte.org with your comments.

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