

A Tradition of Voting with Your Feet for Highly Effective Meetings

by Brian E. Rounsavill

The heart of the Society has been successful meetings. For nearly a century, you could set your watch by them; typically, meetings were held in the first week of May and October each year. Well times have changed. You may notice that this issue of *Interface* contains the Boston meeting program, which is being held during the first week of November. The meeting held in Paris last year began in August. Wait a minute... November and August... what happened to October? And why are we meeting in March in Washington, DC, and in September in San Francisco in 2001?

In this day of fierce competition, changing market conditions, and dwindling lead times, the Society has had to become very adept at finding the most cost-effective dates and places in which to hold our Spring and Fall meetings each year. Some of the time-worn traditions or "must haves" have become secondary to other factors that go into making these decisions.

In 1993, the Society Meeting Subcommittee of the Long Range Planning Committee extensively studied the future direction of Society meetings.¹ The outcome focused on giving the Society more flexibility and the attendees better value by gaining a clearer understanding of attendee preferences, market conditions, and available facilities in an effort to improve the quality, content, and operation of Society meetings. We are now experiencing the results of this plan.

Jumping on the bandwagon along with David Letterman's infamous "Top 10 Lists" and Stephen Covey's "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People," here is what one could call the Society's "Ten Attributes of Highly Effective Meetings." The following issues outline many factors which affect meeting date, location, and hotel selection and shed some light on why Society meetings have moved away from the traditional dates to which we had all become accustomed.



Fig. 1 – A view of the Seventh General Meeting of the American Electrochemical Society which was held in Boston, Massachusetts April 25-27, 1905. (Photo from Society Archives)

1 History – Since 1902, Society meetings have provided individuals with an opportunity and a forum for exchanging information on the latest scientific and technical developments in the fields of electrochemistry and solid-state science and technology. Over the last century, Society meetings have taken place in both small and large facilities (even on trains!)² in cities all over the world. The Society has built a tradition of organizing cost-effective, high quality meetings which continue to evolve to meet the changing demands of the meetings industry as well as the varied needs of the individual attendees. (Fig. 1).

2 Proliferation and Reduction – Today's Society meetings are highly fragmented with typically 20 concurrent technical sessions in which over 1,000 technical papers are presented covering more than 35 individual symposia over five days. The majority of the sessions consist of oral presentations, although there has been an increase in the use of poster presentations recently. While the total number of simultaneous technical sessions has been steadily increasing, the

ratio of meeting attendees to technical papers has been decreasing due to time, funding, and travel restrictions (Fig. 2). The proliferation of simultaneous technical sessions increases the need for more meeting space while attracting a smaller relative number of attendees.

3 Under One Roof – Tradition, experience, and attendee feedback have shown that one major advantage of Society meetings is the convenience of having all meeting events and sleeping rooms "under one roof." The ability to jump easily between sessions and mingle with colleagues in the hallways, reception areas, and lounges in the headquarters hotel is an important aspect of Society meetings. The many simultaneously scheduled technical sessions plus an exhibition and many luncheons, committee meetings, receptions, and informal gatherings typically require about 40 concurrent meeting rooms ranging in seating capacities from 20 to 2,000. Consequently, the number of cities with meeting hotels that have adequate meeting space to house our expanding meeting requirements under one roof has been declining.

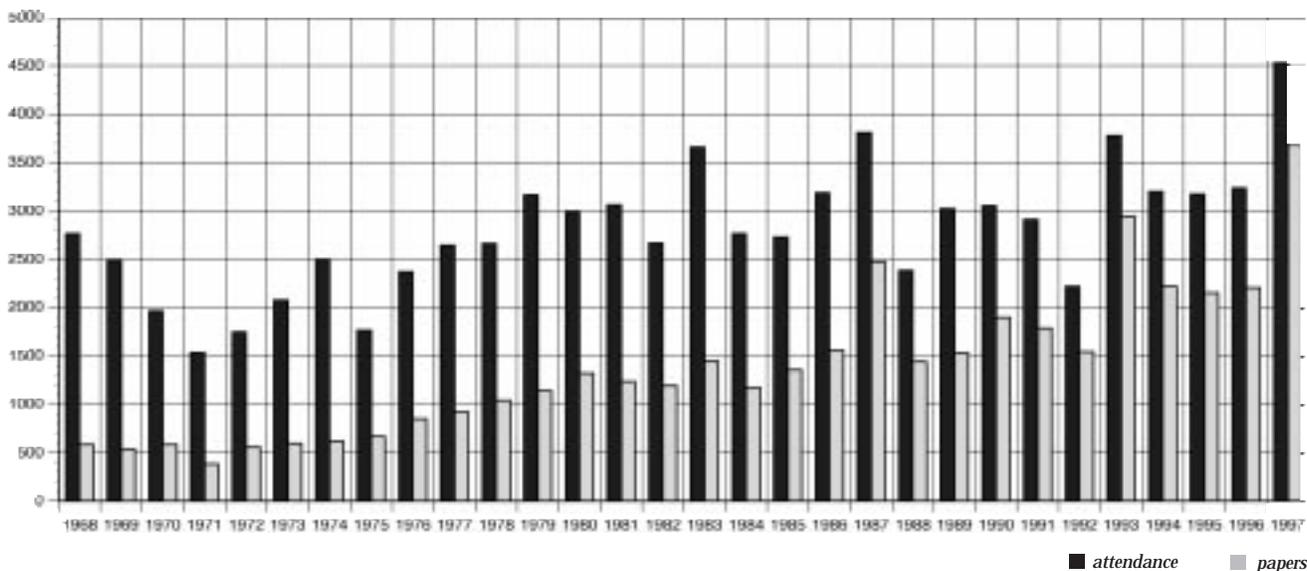


Fig. 2. - Historical attendance vs. papers. The ratio of attendees to papers has been declining over the last two decades.

4 Geographical Rotation - We have no crystal ball to help us select meeting destinations. Since the Society is an international organization, we try to maintain a reasonable geographical balance of meeting destinations among cities in the eastern, central, and western United States, as well as Hawaii, Canada, and Europe. Meetings in Hawaii are organized approximately every five years; meetings in Canada are scheduled every five or six years. Furthermore, the success of the Paris meeting and the internationalization of the Society have emphasized the need to meet more frequently in Europe. Meetings in Hawaii, Canada, and Europe leave fewer options for the east, central, and west coast destinations in the United States. Therefore, the Society has emphasized larger, "first tier" cities in the United States, such as Washington, DC, Chicago, San Francisco, and Boston that have proven drawing power.

5 Five- to Six-Year Lead Times - It sure sounds like a long way off, but the Society must sign a contract with the headquarters hotel to secure the use of the meeting facility and sleeping rooms at least five to six years in advance of the meeting dates. As a result, meetings are confirmed through 2004, and we are exploring options for 2005 and beyond (Table 1). This five- to six-year lead time is essential for obtaining preferred dates in first tier cities while securing facilities at the lowest possible costs. By looking ahead, the Society is able to work with hotels to have first choice of available dates and locations, while filling gaps in demand, or possibly matching our

meeting with another meeting to find the most cost-effective opportunities.

6 Spring and Fall Meetings - The Society has held meetings in May and October for nearly a century and shifting this tradition is a tough thing to do. "Within organizations steeped in tradition and in which the planner's suggestion to, for instance, change the dates of a meeting to obtain a better rate is met with the familiar reply, 'We've always done it this way before'."³ However, in the hotel industry it is widely known that the highest demand for meeting facilities is in the spring and fall, usually April-May and October. To have more options and lower sleeping room rates, moving away from peak demand times into "shoulder" periods, such as March and November, yields greater flexibility, value, and more options.

7 Competition and Value - Not only is there competition for premier meeting hotels, dates, and destinations, there is competition for meeting attendees as well. The Society routinely faces competition from other technical, engineering, and scientific societies for popular dates in May and October in first-tier cities, and we make a great effort to avoid direct conflicts when deciding on a particular time frame and destination. Meeting attendees are often forced to choose between one meeting or another because their time and travel budgets have been reduced. Therefore, the Society has increased our member services and injected greater value into our meetings to attract attendees. Value-added events such as an expanded lecture and awards program, the addition

of a technical exhibition, more informal complimentary events for networking, and other tutorials and workshops enhance the value of attending Society meetings. We have also become a leader among scientific societies in the area of electronic submission of meeting abstracts, utilizing the flexibility and speed of the Web to further enhance our meetings. No other technical society accepts abstracts with such large amounts of technical content in such a wide variety of formats in a faster, more convenient mode. The rapid turnaround time between our abstract deadlines and the publication of the final technical program in relation to the actual meeting dates is the shortest in the industry, which allows for the latest scientific results to be presented. Another competitive advantage for the Society.

8 Current Market Conditions - "The rules of the game concerning hotel accommodations have changed dramatically since association meeting planners held most of the trump cards in the 1980s. What was once a buyers' market for hotel rooms has become one for sellers. Before the Tax Recovery Act of 1986, loopholes rewarded overbuilding in the hotel industry because hotel owners could use properties as tax write-offs. Once new construction halted, hotel demand eventually caught up with supply. By the 1990s, owners expected a return on their investments; sales directors were held accountable, and their compensation was often tied to the property's performance."³ The pendulum has swung in the direction of the hotels and the hospitality

industry is unwilling to assume any risk. Consequently, ECS must be resourceful as we wait for the pendulum to swing back in our favor.

9 Performance/Attrition - As a result of this shift in demand, the handshake that sealed the deals of the past has been replaced with a contract littered with legalese centered on yield management. "Over the past decade, most hotels have begun to require that nearly all groups include in their contracts an attrition clause - essentially a promise to pay for unused rooms if the organization fails to fill an agreed-upon-percentage of the rooms it has reserved. And during the past two years, they have been extending them to include not only sleeping-room charges but food-and-beverage expenses and meeting space rentals as well."⁴ A typical Society meeting is a million dollar piece of business for a hotel. The Society's performance is measured by every sleeping room, cup of coffee, phone call, and meal, that is purchased or consumed in the headquarters hotel. If a certain level of revenue is not achieved by the hotel, then the Society is often contractually liable to make up the difference (*the attrition*) in total revenue.

10 Attendees "Vote with Their Feet" - Meeting facility rental costs are typically offset by the number of sleeping rooms that the Society is able to fill in the hotel over the dates of the meeting. On average, the Society is lucky to get half of the attendees to stay at the headquarters hotel because many attendees choose not to stay at the headquarters hotel (*they vote with their feet*) due to limited budgets, corporate travel restrictions, and alternative hotel chain preferences. When the Society is unable to fulfill our contractual obligations it weakens the Society's negotiating position and increases the likelihood that hotels will invoke liquidated damages and/or attrition clauses that are now common in hotel contracts. Therefore, the Society's hotel rates are often guaranteed to be the lowest possible rates offered at the headquarters hotel during the dates of the meeting, which usually gets the attendees' vote.

Conclusions - In order to continue the Society's successful string of meetings, "negotiating the best deal today depends in large part on a cluster of elements: a group's creativity in dealing with attrition clauses; how

Table 1. Recent and Future Meetings of The Electrochemical Society, Inc.

191 st	May 4-9, 1997	Montreal, Quebec, Canada
192 nd	Aug. 31-Sept. 5, 1997	Paris, France
193 rd	May 3-8, 1998	San Diego, California
194 th	November 1-6, 1998	Boston Massachusetts
195 th	May 2-7, 1999	Seattle, Washington
196 th	October 17-22, 1999	Honolulu, Hawaii
197 th	May 14-19, 2000	Toronto, Ontario, Canada
198 th	October 22-27, 2000	Phoenix, Arizona
199 th	March 25-30, 2001	Washington, DC
200 th	September 2-7, 2001	San Francisco, California
201 st	May 12-17, 2002	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
202 nd	October 6-11, 2002	Salt Lake City, Utah
203 rd	April 22-May 2, 2003	* Paris, France
204 th	October 12-17, 2003	Orlando, Florida
205 th	May 11-16, 2004	San Antonio, Texas
206 th	October 3-8, 2004	* Honolulu, Hawaii

* Indicates that Meeting date and location have not been finalized.

much historical data the association can bring to the table; its inclusion of more than room rates when negotiating contracts; its flexibility regarding meeting times and locations; and its ability to prioritize its absolute 'must haves'."³ As we have seen, there is a great deal of research, planning, and negotiation involved with the selection of each meeting destination and date. If we cling to sacred "must haves" like holding meetings at the same time each Spring and Fall, with many simultaneous events scheduled under one roof, we limit ourselves to only a few major cities with facilities that are large enough to contain our meetings. As a consequence, we sacrifice value and force attendees to pay a premium to attend our meetings in these expensive cities at peak times.

In the future, we probably will see more variation in meeting dates in a combination of both first and second tier cities in an attempt to offer the greatest value possible to our meeting attendees. As we wait for the pendulum to swing back in our favor, we must be proactive and flexible if we want to continue our century-long tradition of success and keep our meeting attendees voting with their feet for Society meetings. ■

References and Resources

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5. J. Foster, "Attrition: Stricter Attrition Clauses Are Putting Meeting Sponsors at Risk," *Convene*, September 1997.
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7. C. Benini, "Negotiations from the Hotelier's Point of View - How They Size You Up, Set Rates and Seal the Deal," *Meetings & Conventions*, October 1995.

About the Author

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