

What Does It Take to Bring Your Meeting Abstracts On Line?

Chair:

Susan K Chambers
American Society of Plant Physiologists
Rockville, Maryland

Panelists:

Ray Everngam
Entomological Society of America
Lanham, Maryland

Sue Sandmeyer

American Association of Dental Schools
Washington, DC

Reporter:

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American Society of Plant Physiologists
Rockville, Maryland

Susan Chambers described how online abstracts can improve the quality of a meeting before, during, and after the meeting. Abstracts submitted on line are available months ahead of time, and that gives members immediate access and allows them to create a “personal program” ahead of time by printing out abstracts on subjects they are interested in. Online submission also levels the playing field for international contributors, makes submission easier, and saves staff time — and therefore money— by eliminating the need for typing and indexing. Authors and staff can update or correct abstracts immediately and almost up to the last minute. After a meeting, abstracts will be available archivally in a searchable database.

Members should be informed of the

change in how abstracts are handled, such as with brightly colored announcements and follow-ups. Progress should be monitored and comment encouraged. Lists of what worked and what did not work can serve as lessons learned for future improvements. And it is useful to poll all relevant parties for their suggestions.

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Ray Everngam stressed how well the Entomological Society of America’s procedure was received by its members. Most turned out to be very Web-savvy. Everngam and associates had a 90% to 95% participation rate. Their system was well used both during the meeting and afterward. Furthermore, he found that the process was highly interactive—authors formed collaborations and shared such material as research and class notes and syllabuses.

Slides of pages from the system showed it to be extremely user-friendly and practically fail-safe. For example, an abstract can be edited extensively until the “Submit Abstract” button is clicked, and even then the question “Are you sure?” comes up, giving one more chance to change things! Online abstract sub-

mission defines a new relationship between society members and the society, provides for accumulating information in a searchable database, is a model for electronic book publishing (which can be updated “on the fly”), and hints at other applications for the future. One of the biggest benefits is that a disposable annual-meeting program now becomes a usable database.

Sue Sandmeyer’s system was developed as the first step to reviewing and accepting papers electronically, which everyone agreed is coming in the future. Sandmeyer’s group’s goal was to reduce the personnel and time required to get through the process of publishing meeting abstracts. Their biggest difficulty was making sure that the review process stayed double-blind. Passwords were used to achieve that goal. Once the abstracts were submitted electronically, the authors were not allowed to change anything, but they could call Sue directly and she would make the desired changes. The biggest cost saving resulted from the elimination of scanning, numbering, and typing. Formerly, a temporary worker was hired each year to type abstracts; this year, only 26 of 206 abstracts were received by mail. The visual quality of the abstracts was much improved because all abstracts had the same format. Each abstract was given a tracking number, and authors were sent a confirmation copy via e-mail within 2 hours of the time of submission. ■