

Producing Conference Programs: Tips from Pros

Judith McIntosh White

No matter how small or large the scientific conference, the prospect of producing a printed program for it can fill many an editor or writer with dread. To help alleviate panic and make the process easier and more efficient, three veterans of the program-compilation process shared tips on how to make a success of this integral meeting component.

Kathleen Cullen Fishback, director of publication services for the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS); Yvonne R Towse, administrative director of AVS-The Science and Technology Society (member of the American Institute of Physics); and Janette Gervin, of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Goddard Space Flight Center, graciously shared pointers gleaned from more than 20 years of combined experience in producing conference programs.

Although the number of meeting participants and the number of pages in printed programs vary, the complete program-production process, from the first call for papers to the finished product, takes 9 to 12 months, all the respondents agreed, and the process is similar for each of the three.

Fishback produces the printed programs for the AAAS annual meeting, which usually has 5000 to 6000 attendees, and for the AAAS Science, Technology and Policy Colloquium, attended by about 500. The annual meeting program book runs about 300 pages, and the colloquium program is usually 12 pages.

Towse likewise produces printed programs for multiple meetings, in this case the AVS annual international symposium, the AVS International Conference on Microelectronics and Interfaces, and vari-

JUDITH MCINTOSH WHITE prepared this article while a Science Editor fellow.

ous topical conferences that AVS cosponsors. None of the meetings is usually as large as the AAAS annual conference, but AVS meeting printed programs can run 50 to 250 pages.

Gervin has done five printed programs for smaller meetings, including one for a NASA science conference and another for the technical conference of the American

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Society for Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing, Potomac Region.

Steps to an Excellent Meeting Program

For the most part, all three respondents outlined the same steps to producing the final meeting program:

1. Issue the call for papers (this may be handled by the person doing the program or by a different staffer).
2. Assemble the abstracts submitted, usually in a computerized database, regardless of the method of submission (mail, e-mail, fax, or upload to the Web). Fishback says the process of compiling the abstracts database is handled by the AAAS Meetings Office.
3. Forward the file to decision-makers to determine which papers are to be accepted for presentation. In Towse's case, this involves review by a 150-member program committee!
4. Lay out the program. Gervin gets help from graphic artists, whereas Fishback says her group retains templates for the book and uses the same ones every year, but "this is the first year we are collect-

ing the abstracts in house, and we will no longer print them in the book, but rather supply them as a CD bound into the book."

5. Proofread, correct, and update the draft program and either send it to a printer or print it in house. In either case, proofs of the program will be provided for review before the final printing.

Gervin, who has worked mainly on smaller conferences, also mentioned the need to plan finances available for program production at the beginning of the process.

Program Preparation Not Full-Time

Program preparation is only part of the job of all three respondents. Printed meeting programs constitute a major duty only for Fishback, but they're not her only job. Her typical workday consists of managing publication projects and bid processes, negotiating with vendors, some production, and invoicing for such work products as books, brochures, direct-mail pieces, pages in *Science*, and mugs, pens, and signs. She manages a staff of one full-time art director and one part-time graphic artist.

Towse says she also has "many other duties" besides program preparation, and Gervin's main job involves managing science and engineering projects. "I recently supervised the building of two space instruments", she said. "And I write papers, prepare presentations, hold reviews and meetings, oversee tests, and make technical and financial decisions here at Goddard."

Challenges and Rewards

Both Gervin and Towse said their greatest challenge involved getting the timing right—working within time constraints to collect and organize all materials. For Fishback, compiling the abstract and sessions sections of the program seems to run smoothly, but the rest of the printed pro-

gram can be a challenge, in that she must see that all hotel or convention-center maps are redrawn, account for last-minute schedule and location changes, and so on.

“We have a later piece printed, called a ‘Pocket Guide’, and then meet daily to discuss things that change after the program is printed or the meeting starts”, she said.

Gervin, Towse, and Fishback agreed that their greatest reward is seeing a successful finished program come back from the printers—and getting those compliments from conference attendees and authors about “the quality of the program book”.

Tips for Successful Printed Programs

The respondents had the following tips for readers who find themselves suddenly in charge of bringing a conference program to life:

- Give yourself as much lead time as possible.

sible.

- Set priorities and make a schedule of tasks and deadlines—then make sure

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you meet the deadlines you’ve set.

- Keep information in a standard format and location in the program for each successive meeting.
- Number section pages of the book differently. For example, AAAS numbers introduction pages with small Roman numerals and prefixes page numbers

for symposiums and seminars with an “S” and those for abstracts with an “A”. “That way we can add or delete pages as needed up until the ship-to-printer date”, Fishback said. “Advertising is scattered throughout or before or after section breaks.”

- Copyedit drafts as necessary, and then proofread the final product before it goes to press. Remember, as Towse says, “some cleanup is always required.”
- Solicit comments from attendees and staff regarding the program, and use their criticisms or accolades constructively.
- To cut down on costs, consider presenting abstracts on CD rather than printing them.
- Finally, as Gervin says, “make the final product beautiful” through artistic layout using full color and pictures. 

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At this educational retreat, participants will have a chance to explore the ethical, legal, and pragmatic implications of scientific misconduct with publishers, editors, and managers of scientific journals, members of the academic community, representatives of oversight agencies, and other experts. For more information, watch the CSE Web site, www.CouncilScienceEditors.org.