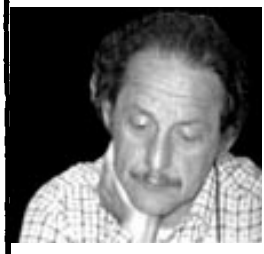

Current Comments

Making Contacts at Conferences— A Problem for the Young Scientist

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Most scientists or scholars attend conferences as part of their professional lives. Conferences, whether they are called symposia, meetings, congresses, jamborees, or workshops, are supposed to "provide opportunities for conferees to exchange information, evaluate proposed ideas, cross-pollinate views and extend knowledge."[1] One of the best ways to accomplish these goals is through meeting other scientists with similar interests.[2] But young professionals, graduate students, and other newcomers often have difficulties making contacts at conferences.[3] My personal experience and a review of the recent literature confirm this view. And because of rising expenses, young people especially have difficulties getting to conferences.[4] So it is important for them to get the most out of those they can attend.

Whether a conference is large or small it often seems to present some serious stumbling blocks to young scientists. In fact, one of the major criticisms of large international or national meetings is that they are less valuable to the young than they should be.[5] One reason for this is that they are often held in large metropolitan areas. Attendees with little money—students or young professionals—usually must travel to the conference at their own expense. Once there, they must pay a registration fee which many feel is rising beyond the means of the young.

Accommodations present another problem. In order to get an inexpensive room, the young attendee is often forced to stay miles away from the conference proper. This segregation inhibits interaction between the young and the more established professionals staying close to the meeting site.[6] As H. Gutfreund of the University of Bristol pointed out, "Interaction between all ages and interests must be made inevitable by accommodation in close proximity and joint eating facilities."[5]

Isaac Welt, professor of information science at American University, comments that societies can help solve this problem by scheduling meetings in hotels that give differential rates to young people or in

inexpensive hotels.[7] Organizations should also gear conference registration fees to the young professional's income in the same way some membership rates are now determined. Many professional societies have student membership rates. These price reductions could be extended to student registration fees at society conferences.

If larger meetings inhibit young scientists from making contacts, one would think that smaller meetings would be the solution. Unfortunately, small meetings restrict attendance. Often only "invited" speakers can participate. These are usually senior people. This practice locks out others who might be interested in attending. One solution to this problem is to organize sessions devoted to "contributed" papers. Speaking on this issue recently, Herbert A. Laitinen, editor of *Analytical Chemistry*, pointed out that these "open" sessions sometimes represent the only mechanism by which the young investigator may penetrate the inner circle. Nevertheless, these open sessions can be less than satisfactory. He recommends "more critical evaluation of openly contributed papers to screen out those of a routine character, whose main reason seems to be to justify attendance." He adds, "If meeting attendance were not conditional upon presentation of a paper, the results would be an improvement in the meetings."[8]

One idea advanced by Welt is that small meetings should have a quota for first-time attendees.[7] If a certain number of the participants were required to be novices, the conference could be prevented from becoming the breeding ground for a self-perpetuating elite.

Another problem with small meetings is that it is difficult to cover the expenses required to bring eminent scholars there. Given a choice, the young scientist will go to the larger meeting if it increases the chance for encounters with scientists in the forefront of research. Small meetings afford little opportunity to meet people outside a narrow specialty. Large meetings can bring together people with diverse interests.

In an article entitled "Meeting failure and participant frustration", Anthony Judge agrees that a frequent source of frustration for many participants is lack of adequate contact between attendees. Since it is well-documented that establishing contacts is one of the major reasons young as well as established professionals attend conferences, this frustration can be acute.[3]

Robert Freedman adds that attending a meeting allows conference goers to "strike up a casual conversation in the lunch queue and hear about a technique which will solve their problems, to track down a Romanian who published a rather interesting paper last year, to steel themselves to approach a legendary figure to ask if they may come to his lab."[6] Judge points out that "more experienced par-

ticipants select sessions and parts of sessions and spend the remainder of their time in the hallways talking to the eminent people seated at strategic spots to receive them." The most eminent people, however, are "found outside the conference centre in a bar arranging the next conference."[3]

If the established professionals are not actually at the conference sessions, how then can the newcomer really break into their inner circle? In a previous essay, I pointed out how difficult it is for people to introduce themselves to strangers at conferences.[9] At that time, I proposed that the first day of any conference be devoted to information encounter groups. Each attendee would be assigned to a small group of about 30 persons. In the morning each person would speak for about five minutes, providing biographical information and discussing the problems he or she hoped the meeting would help him or her solve. In the afternoon, a follow-up discussion would allow participants to make suggestions or ask clarifying questions. This method allows both the established professionals and the young conference goers to make contacts and also gives them some information upon which to base a later approach. Such meetings, however, require a strong group leader to guide the discussions.

A variation on this theme would be to organize informal discussion groups led by well-known scientists or scholars. Participation could be limited to 30 to 50 people who had applied in advance. Priority in selection could be based on age, research interests, or other considerations.

Established professionals need to be reminded that it is their responsibility to make sure their charges meet the right people at conferences. I agree with Welt when he says that it is the duty of the young professional's mentor, professor, or job supervisor to help the young scientist meet not only senior people but each other.[7] Senior people should act as "people-to-people catalysts," he says.

The American Chemical Society (ACS), has grappled with the problems of young chemists in their Younger Chemists Committee (YCC). During national and regional meetings, young professionals can stop by the YCC booth and meet the members of the committee.[10] At national meetings, ACS sponsors an Industrial Forum. Several invited industrial chemists speak for a few minutes and then answer questions from the young audience. In that way, students can get to know working scientists.

Several of my colleagues have pointed out that the problem of making contacts at conferences applies even to experienced professionals if they wish to attend conferences outside their field. For example, a person with a Ph.D. in biology who has just gotten a job in publishing feels "lost" at a publishing conference. People trying to expand their interdisciplinary hori-

zons should be given a chance to mingle with the "in-groups." The same applies to people who go to school while they work and have no time to go to conferences. When they've finally completed their studies and can attend the meetings, they feel isolated. They are older than the students, but far less experienced in conferences than others their age.

Professional conference organizers see great hope in the future use of computers to facilitate making contacts at conferences.[11] This new technology can help both the young and the more established scientist find people with similar interests. Future conference participants will preregister their specific areas of interest and indicate their preferences for meeting in small groups or on a one-to-one basis. Each participant will also indicate the time he or she will be available. The computer would then match parties with the same interests and schedule contacts.

Conferences can be computerized by using a message processing system. Groups of terminals could be set up at the conference site with assistants available to help participants use them. To retrieve your messages, you would simply type your name and registration number. All messages for you would either appear on the terminal's screen or be printed out. Simple messages like "you left your coat in my car" could be stored. But more importantly, a graduate student could ask, for example, if anyone at the conference would like to discuss his or her thesis topic. Or you could ask a question of a particular speaker that you didn't have a chance to ask during the session. The speaker could answer the question some time later. You would find the answer when you interrogated the terminal the next day. This could help young scientists participate more fully since they are often reluctant to ask questions from the conference floor.

An extensive article on this method of making contacts at conferences appeared recently in *Associations Transnationales,* published by the Belgium-based Union of International Associations. The article listed the almost endless possible uses that could be made of computers at conferences. "Each person should leave with the belief that he or she has been provided with an environment which made possible the optimum number of useful contacts under the circumstances," it concluded.[11]

Surely the use of computers will enhance conferences, especially for the young attendee. More young professionals will travel to the large gatherings if they have better chances of making beneficial contacts. But the day of the computerized conference, although on the horizon, has not yet arrived. For young scientists, many successful contacts are still too often made by chance. They deserve some special attention from con-

ference organizers to make sure the established and the not-so-established meet and share experiences.

Perhaps what is needed is for some of the professional societies to set up a conference on the problem of making contacts at conferences. Professional conference organizers have already taken up the question at their meetings. But the scientific information and communication societies, which are most affected by the problem, should devote more attention to it.

In the meantime, young scientists should try to discard their assumptions that eminent people are unapproachable. In my experience, I have always found that leading scientists were willing to talk for at least a few minutes. If our interests coincided, there was always a way to find more time. I remember my first professional society meeting in 1951—the American Chemical Society's annual meeting in New York City. I wandered into the session given by the Division of Chemical Literature. After I heard the chairman, James W. Perry, speak, I walked up to him and said, "How do you get into this racket?" A few days later he was eating dinner at my parents' apartment in the Bronx.

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