

Pittcon[®] 2006: Challenges and Changes in the Wind

by Thomas Ricci

The trade show industry is changing. Overall attendance is down and even a few of the giants, like Comdex (one of the computer industry's leading events), have disappeared. Part of the blame rests on a combination of reduced travel budgets and the availability of virtual trade shows, which are becoming a more popular and lower-cost option for organizations and their customers. Just about any information imaginable is available with a click of the mouse, and you can attend a virtual trade show without ever having to leave your office or laboratory bench.

An unstoppable trend? Not so, say organizers of Pittcon[®] (The Pittsburgh Conference on Analytical Chemistry and Applied Spectroscopy), the world's premier conference and exposition for laboratory science. In fact, Conference organizers are making significant changes that they believe will draw thousands of participants to the event in 2006 and beyond. (See *Figure 1*.)

"We are planning for growth," says Pittcon 2006 President Kevin McKaveney. "There is no substitute for knowledge that is gained through personal interaction, whether it is via a hands-on product demonstration or a one-on-one discussion with an expert in his or her field. Pittcon's value has been in its ability to provide a forum for that technical interaction, and I see no reason why that should change."

Since 800 analytical chemists gathered in Pittsburgh for the first Pittcon in 1950, it has enjoyed unparalleled growth within the scientific community. At its height in the mid-nineties, Pittcon hosted over 34,000 conferees and exhibitors and utilized over a million square feet of exhibition and meeting space.

Conferees still find Pittcon to be a great place to evaluate equipment from multiple vendors, to get answers to their technical questions, and to network and learn from their colleagues—all in one place. Over the years, the show has become the preferred venue for conferees to present their scientific

data and to gain valuable insights from the work of others. Exhibitors have benefited from the tremendous marketing value of the event.

Even so, McKaveney acknowledges that it could be a bumpy road. Like most other events of its kind, Pittcon is feeling the aftershocks of 9/11 as well as the combined effects of a sluggish economy; dwindling travel budgets; and, of course, the instantaneous availability of information over the Web.

So how is Pittcon going to buck the trend? According to McKaveney: "We are revamping the expo and conference format in 2006 to provide more value for both conferees and exhibitors. We are also unveiling a fresh philosophy organizationally that will give us longer-term vision and enable us to be more proactive in dealing with external factors."

Creation of Strategic Marketing Committee to ensure long-term program continuity

Pittcon continues to be the only conference of its size organized and run primarily by a dedicated group of volunteers and a handful of paid staff. In 2006, 30 committees, with over 125 volunteers, are in place to run the Conference. Each year the Committee chairs rotate, bringing in new volunteers and fresh ideas.

To maintain program continuity even with the annual change in leadership, Pittcon has created a long-term Strategic Marketing Committee (SMC), which is charged with overseeing a multiyear marketing strategy while helping to develop new marketing initiatives. The Committee, which comprises five Pittcon committee members (four of whom are former Pittcon presidents), will serve a five-year term. To



Figure 1 Thousands of scientists are expected to visit Pittcon 2006 to be held March 12–17, 2006, in the Orange County Convention Center, Orlando, FL.



Figure 2 The Pittcon 2006 Committee plans to introduce several new programs designed to facilitate Exhibitor and Conferee interaction during the Conference.

maintain a fresh outlook, one member of the SMC will be replaced yearly.

“Maintaining the momentum of a well-devised marketing plan requires a consensus on the part of the current leadership and buy-in from the following year’s leadership on programs extending over one year,” said SMC Chairman, Dr. Dick Obyrcki. “The SMC will address

these strategic issues and will offer long-term guidance and advice to the annual Marketing and Publicity Committees.”

Poised for change in 2006

Each year, the Committee gathers feedback from exhibitors and conferees and creates a scorecard of strengths and weaknesses of the past year’s Con-

ference. In 2005, the majority of conferees surveyed were happy with Pittcon, saying that it met or exceeded their expectations. (See *Figure 2*.)

On the exhibitor side, it seemed that a growing number of exhibitors were becoming concerned about a decline in attendance. Also, comments about the lack of communication between exhibitors and the Committee were voiced. Pittcon resolved to reestablish better communications with exhibitors, address their issues head on, and involve them in the decision-making process for marketing initiatives.

“The Pittcon Committee agreed that establishing better relations with our exhibitors was as much a critical factor to our success as was increasing the value of attending for our conferees,” said McKaveney. “As a result, we are taking significant steps towards establishing a strong communications network with our exhibitors.”

Addition of new exhibitor communications vehicles

The Pittcon 2006 Committee expanded the traditional pre-Pittcon meeting in April 2005 to include brainstorming sessions on marketing, launching of a new Web site focused on Pittcon exhibitor marketing, and scheduling of monthly e-newsletters to the exhibitors at large. The communications will focus on announcing and explaining all decisions and changes that directly affect the Exposition, and soliciting feedback whenever possible.

Establishment of Exhibitor Advisory Council for Marketing

To bolster its marketing efforts, the SMC established an Exhibitor Advisory Council For Marketing (EACFM), whose mission is to evaluate and advise the Committee on programs designed to promote the Conference and make it a better experience for all participants. The Council comprises 12 acting Council members representing exhibitors of all sizes. The Council members will rotate every two years to allow other companies to participate.



Figure 3 Marketing campaigns targeting Pittcon's core analytical audience as well as nontraditional sectors, such as life sciences and drug discovery areas, are expected to boost attendance.

"The Council is representative of all of our exhibitors and will act as a conduit for exhibitor communication. By leveraging the collective wisdom of these marketing professionals, we have a great sounding board and collaborative vehicle to improve our marketing efforts," said McKaveney. (See Figures 3 and 4.)

Increased conferee marketing efforts

The Pittcon Committee has set a goal to increase attendance by 10% in 2006. "We believe this increase can be realistically achieved and will help increase the value and ROI (return on investment) to our exhibitors," said McKaveney.

Pittcon recognizes that attracting more conferees is no easy task, given tighter travel budgets and limitations on the number of conferences employees are permitted to attend each year. The Pittcon Committee believes that improving the technical portion of the Conference will increase value for conferees and jus-



Figure 4 The Pittcon 2006 Committee's new Exhibitor Marketing Web site is designed to encourage more comarketing opportunities with exhibitors.

tify the expense of sending more scientists to the Conference. Pittcon is currently developing symposia

for 2006 that focus on areas of critical importance such as bioterrorism, cancer detection, and nanotechnology.

The SMC also believes that expanding its reach to conferees in nontraditional Pittcon sectors, such as the life sciences and drug discovery areas, will help increase attendance. In 2005, for instance, nearly 32% of the technical sessions were geared toward the life sciences and pharmaceutical areas. Pittcon has scheduled an aggressive marketing and public relations campaign designed to demonstrate the educational value in attending Pittcon. The campaign is unprecedented in scope and will reach well over one million people over the course of the year.

Change of focus on improving the conferee experience

The Committee has made sweeping changes in its Exhibition rules and regulations, all designed to address conferee and exhibitor concerns and to find more ways to improve conferee and exhibitor interaction. In 2006, the Committee is sponsoring social events on the Expo floor dur-

ing the Conference, providing more time for conferees to network with each other and additional opportunities for conferees to meet with exhibitors. For the first time, exhibitors will also be able to offer their visitors snacks and beverages in the booth, and even do so in a multilevel booth. More open seating and rest areas will offer conferees ample opportunity to rest their weary legs. A better-organized Technical Program schedule and a strong effort to minimize concurrent sessions will allow conferees to see and hear what they want a bit more easily and in a more organized fashion.

Twice a charm in Orlando

Pittcon will be back in Orlando, FL, in 2006, and the Pittcon Committee strongly feels that its new look and revamped programs will lead to more participants and a better experience for all.

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