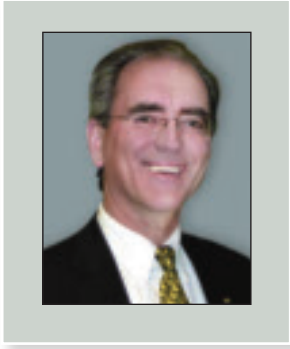


▶ MANAGING EDITOR'S DESK



Nelson Fabian, MS

I've often made the point in this column that NEHA is a living entity. As with all living entities, "feedback" is very important to us. Feedback allows a living system to gauge how well it is interacting with its environment and to know when change is necessary to ensure that that relationship remains healthy—and relevant.

I can't emphasize this point strongly enough. For an organization like NEHA to succeed, it has to remain relevant to its constituents. The day we become irrelevant is the day we die.

We use various forms of feedback to monitor how well we are connecting with our members and stakeholders. I'm exceedingly proud to report that for the most part, our programs, services, elected leaders, staff, and volunteers all seem to be in phase with member expectations. We recently had an experience, however, in which one of our most important programs—the Annual Educational Conference (AEC)—elicited some strong and constructive criticism that indicated that some changes are necessary. I'll share that story with you in this column because I want the membership to know that we've heard and digested the criticisms. We will make the appropriate changes. We remain uncompromisingly anchored to the need for NEHA to be relevant and of value to our members.

Every year NEHA conducts a fairly extensive attendee evaluation of our annual conference. This year's evaluation was a little different than most, because this time around, we got a little scorched by some of the criticisms about the AEC.

I'll share what those criticisms were momentarily. I'll then explain what we will do to

Some Good Constructive Annual Educational Conference Criticisms—and Our Response

The day we become irrelevant is the day we die.

change. Finally, I'll offer some commentary to shed some light on why we did what we did.

An often-heard expression out there goes something like "perception is reality." What few people realize is that this is not the original phrase! The actual phrase, coined by a 19th century British thinker, was "In the absence of understanding, perception is reality."

I mention this to set the stage for my later commentary. I think after you read it, you'll understand better why we made the decisions that we did this year, even though some of those decisions led to the criticisms that I will report on here. At least through my commentary everyone's perceptions and even criticisms will be informed by appropriate understanding.

OK—here goes.

Part I: The Criticisms

The three main criticisms in the conference evaluations were as follows.

1. Some attendees did not like the fact that the AEC consumed an entire weekend.
 - a. As a subpoint, some attendees asked that the AEC be returned to its normal pattern, which involves starting on a Sunday morning and ending on a Wednesday night.
2. Some attendees didn't like that the conference was scheduled over Father's Day.

3. Some attendees didn't like that the conference was shortened, since that deprived them of valuable networking and social time with others.

- a. As a subpoint to the comments about a shorter conference, some attendees questioned why the registration fee didn't go down given that the conference this year was a day shorter than it was last year.

(Note: I should add that while we received these criticisms, we also received many commendations for this year's conference. Attendees especially seemed to appreciate the quality of the education and training and the effort we made to make the conference a true return-on-investment experience.)

Part II: What NEHA Will Do

- We will do our very best to shy away from holding another AEC over Father's Day.
- We will do our very best to avoid conducting full programming over both Saturday and Sunday.
- Starting in 2014 (our next open AEC date), we will work with the hotel community to select conference days that correspond more to the traditional Sunday–Wednesday conference timeframe.

Part III: The Commentary

While the issues and the above response may seem pretty straightforward, even to the point of wondering why I would write about this, the background to this year's issues is arguably much more complicated than most would likely suspect. In fact, the opportunity to talk to you about what led to many of this year's deci-

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Managing Editor's Desk

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sions will shed some light on what NEHA went through in an effort to respond to a number of important considerations. *Therein lies the story worth telling.* I say that because the following story reveals much about how NEHA, your association, works. I think that makes the following response worth your valuable reading time.

I'll take each criticism one by one.

1. Don't hold the AEC over the weekend and return it to the normal pattern.

NEHA's normal conference pattern is to start the AEC on Sunday morning and end it with the president's banquet on Wednesday night. Based on our careful analysis of the room count that we've done each year, it is apparent that upwards of 80%–90% of our conference attendees are booked into the hotel(s) by Saturday night. In fact, most of those attendees arrive on Friday or before. The small remainder of that 80%–90% traveled to the AEC on Saturday. *In other words, within the context of our normal pattern, an overwhelming number of our attendees have devoted their entire weekend to the AEC!*

This year might have seemed different because the conference formally began on Saturday, not Sunday. In reality, however, only a very small difference occurred between this year's use of the weekend and our normal use of weekends.

On another track, as we keep our ears to the ground, we are hearing from members that beyond the financial challenges of getting employer approval to attend NEHA's AEC, time away from the office has become just as important a challenge. Many employers are now limiting conference attendance because they can't afford to have staff away from the office, even when conference costs are insignificant. Therefore the idea caught on in our planning that by having two solid conference days over a weekend, the AEC might be easier for a large segment of our members to attend since this would minimize their time away from the office.

Furthermore, a weekend conference usually enables us to secure lower room rates, which we have been loudly told is a major issue for many members.

Finally, many other conferences consume at least a part, if not all, of a weekend. By using a weekend, we didn't realize that we were going against any grain or causing a problem for our members.

2. Don't hold the AEC over Father's Day.

This is in fact not the first time that we've held the AEC over Father's Day. Our membership surveys tell us that the membership slightly favors holding the AEC sometime between mid-June and early July. That means that we need to look for dates that straddle two holidays: Father's Day and July 4th. Because we are often at the mercy of the availability of hotel space, this has meant that for some cities, we've had to meet over Father's Day. (We did this just two years ago when we met in Atlanta and we heard few complaints.)

The issue of space availability is exactly what forced us into the Father's Day weekend time slot this year.

To understand why we were willing to sign a contract for this time slot, we need to back the tape up a bit.

By intention and policy, NEHA is committed to bringing its annual conference to just about all areas of the country. Unlike many other associations that have favorite cities that they rotate through, we purposely take our conference all over with the hope that we can make it easily accessible to all of our members at least once every four or five years. In the case of the decision to take the AEC to Columbus, our board was very much focused on bringing the conference to the upper Midwest, which we hadn't been to since our conference in Chicago in 1996, 15 years ago! (We did go to Minneapolis in 2002, which was just outside this target area.) Keep in mind that we have some large and populated states in this area including Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania.

We also had a particular interest in Ohio since we have such a large affiliate there. Ohio proudly boasts one of the nation's largest REHS/RS programs. Those professionals deserve an easy way to obtain the continuing education that is necessary for their credential. It should also be noted that thanks to the efforts of environmental health professionals in Ohio, environmental health remains a strong and essential core service of government in that state, notwithstanding the brutal impact of the Great Recession on our profession.

After looking over several upper Midwest cities, we determined that Columbus would serve as an excellent host venue. It is a vibrant city with much to offer conference attendees. It also has a good reputation to outsiders.

The problem we ran into in Columbus is that it really only has one hotel that is large enough to host a conference of NEHA's size. Also, that hotel was essentially booked over the mid-June through early July timeframe, except for the dates we selected, which happened to be over Father's Day weekend. In other words, for us to meet in Ohio, we essentially had no choice but to accept these dates.

One other date pattern was actually available but at a significantly higher room cost. In deference to the wishes of our members, NEHA has consistently tried to select the highest-quality hotels with the most affordable rates. We decided that the significantly higher rates would be a major deterrent for people to come to the AEC so we accepted the Father's Day weekend dates.

3. The AEC was too short; go back to the traditional four-day conference. Give us more networking time.

This one was a toughie! We shortened the length of the conference by a day for several reasons.

First, the Great Recession has inflicted a horrible toll on our profession and its ability in particular to acquire continuing education of the type we offer at our AEC. It is no secret that associations like NEHA, which cater primarily to public-sector professionals, have seen their average conference attendance over the last three years decline by as much as 50%. (NEHA's average decline is closer to 30%.)

Second, as noted above, we have learned that employers are refusing to approve attendance not only based on cost but also based on time away from the office. We even had several speakers this year for whom we offered to pay all costs but who still couldn't make the conference because their employers couldn't spare them the time off!

In our effort to be responsive to these circumstances, we redesigned our AEC so that it still featured a rich educational and training program but within fewer days.

Third, the meeting planning literature is absolutely clear on the fact that a megatrend in the meetings world is toward shorter meetings. Irrespective of the employer, potential AEC attendees themselves are telling us that with all the work on their desks, they just can't afford to spend four to five days away. So in response to strong indicators that we monitor, it seemed to us that a shorter conference was consistent with member wishes and even

needs. In fact, we continue to feel that way in spite of the comments we received about the AEC being too short this year.

As for networking opportunities, we worked again this year to expand these opportunities even with one less conference day. Our virtual program also provided new ways for attendees to network with each other that we've never been able to offer before. Still, we hear you on this one.

4. If you are going to shorten the conference, proportionately reduce the registration fee.

As I just mentioned, though we reduced the AEC by a day, we did not reduce the education and training by a day. In fact, in one important respect, we increased it!

This year, at a substantial cost to NEHA, we taped more sessions than we have ever taped before. Also, *for no charge*, we automatically enrolled every single fully registered attendee in our virtual conference program. Attendees therefore have access to more education and training than ever before, including the opportunity to view and review sessions long after the end of the conference. This programming provides attendees with an easy

way to access free and valuable continuing education, which was another goal of ours.

Through this virtual platform, we've also opened up new opportunities for conference attendees to network, pursue discussion threads, access speakers and exhibitors, and organize their education. This is a huge "value add," meaning that attendees were able to get more for their money than ever before.

Sadly, a conference shortened by a day doesn't translate into a prorated reduction in our conference costs. In fact, our costs were very much in line with what our costs have been for the last several years, even though this year's AEC was one day less.

These reasons explain why we were not able to reduce our registration fee.

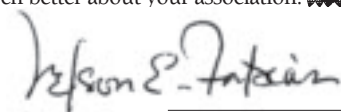
I should add that by paying for a virtual conference platform, we were also able to offer (for about 20% of the AEC registration fee) an opportunity for environmental health professionals who could not come to Columbus to have a valuable and rich conference experience anyway. NEHA lost a significant sum of money on our virtual conference, but we

did help well over 100 EH professionals from across the country advance their education and training thanks to this event. As this program takes off, we do expect it to pay for itself.


Final Word

We sincerely thank those who took the time to offer their feedback about this year's AEC. I said when I began this piece: this kind of feedback is essential to NEHA and our ability to know when we've hit the mark and when we've missed it. Thanks to you, we know we need to make some changes and we will.

In addition, I hope that this commentary achieved some understanding on the reasons why NEHA did what it did and how this association works and thinks. Perceptions too often develop out of misunderstandings and then become needlessly damaging. I hope I've helped to inform your perceptions and in the process made you feel even better about your association. 🐼



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* NAHA -N-acetyl hexosaminidase
**Nocturnal Asthma And Domestic Mould Exposure Narancsik et al. *Am. J. Respir. Crit. Care Med.* 2010; 181: A6653