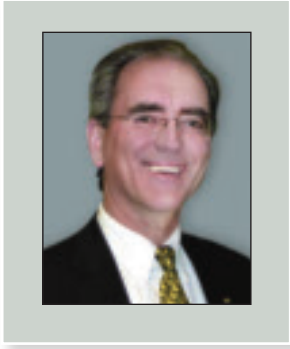


▶ MANAGING EDITOR'S DESK



Nelson Fabian, MS

Over the last two months, I've had the privilege of giving four keynote presentations.

A keynote is somewhat different than a regular speech (though often no less difficult to prepare). For example, one of the missions of a keynote is to stir an audience. Another is to address some large issue or concept and explain how it ties to the audience and its circumstances.

In these presentations, I paid homage to one of the most powerful concepts ever discovered by the human mind: evolution. I stressed that evolution is often seen as a biological theory that describes how living organisms adapt to change and how through these adaptations such organisms "select" for their propagation (and survival). In fact, one of the most famous ideas to come from interpretations of Darwin's discoveries is that "it is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."

From there I tried to hammer home the point that the idea behind evolution applies not just to biological organisms, but to everything! The process of adaptation and survival can be seen across some remarkably different ideas, institutions, processes, and systems. Consider, for example, that evolution aptly describes change in marriages, Las Vegas, United Airlines, language, warfare, the growth in one's garden, politics, the print media, global climate change, cancer, and so on. Little wonder I refer to evolution as one of the most powerful concepts ever described by the human mind, for this idea gives us a way to understand the process of adaptation and survival across virtually anything we wish to consider.

What the Evolution of Our AEC Says About NEHA

You have an association that is very tuned into the idea of evolution—adaptation—and survival.

In my presentations, I used evolution to explore how our profession is adapting to changes that are impacting the practice, and even standing, of environmental health. I talked about how our profession is evolving, whether we like it or not, because that is the natural order of all things.

It's that "like it or not" part that often causes the rub, because adapting isn't always fun, especially if an existing system provides enjoyment and satisfaction. Ask any newspaper owner today about how much fun he or she is having adapting to the growing consumer preference for digitized information. You are not likely to see a smiling face in response!

I was recently at a meeting of prominent environmental health officials. I overheard one colleague say, "If I hear that term 'new normal' one more time, I am going to scream." To my disappointment, he and the people around him laughed as if to say that by their actions, they would have no part in how local and state governments are changing. I cringed because I knew that "like it or not," their programs *are* going to change. Furthermore, I am quite certain that this group will

not be guiding that change but rather will be victims of it.

With all this as a backdrop, let me now turn my attention to NEHA. Like newspaper owners, we had a good thing going for quite a number of years, i.e., our Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition. I'm proud to say that we also got quite good at putting these big events together. Our numbers were even better. Our attendance continued to climb for years, and it was as if our growing attendance was a vindication of the way we were designing and executing our AECs.

And then—

That little socioeconomic event occurred at the end of 2007, something called the Great Recession. What had been this good thing suddenly lost traction. Though our 2008 AEC in Tucson actually fared well, which I believe had something to do with the attractiveness of that destination, our attendance has dropped ever since and it is now 30% down from our past norms.

According to the concept of evolution, when an environmental event occurs such as this recession, entities must adapt to survive. While our annual conference is in no danger of disappearing, we are nonetheless very dissatisfied with our attendance numbers as of late. So we have been adapting.

Fast forward to today and to the AEC that we will be conducting in San Diego. Our revamped AEC looks very little like any we've put on in the past. I spell out for you more explicitly below the many changes that we have made over the past couple of years as we have adapted to a host of new circumstances in both our business environment and yours.

continued on page 48

Managing Editor's Desk

continued from page 54

But first let me pause to underscore the real point that I wish to make, which is not about our profession's annual get-together. Rather, I've chosen to use the example of the AEC to make the point that you have an association that is very tuned into the idea of evolution—adaptation—and survival.

You are not a member of an association that is on automatic pilot. Nor are you a member of an association that uses hope as a business strategy (as if simply hoping that things will get better is a sufficient M.O. to use as we travel through these challenging times). No, you are a member of a very dynamic organization that pays attention to what is happening to its members and to the world around us. We use the insights we derive to tinker, revamp, throw away, or build anew so that we remain relevant to you and in sync with how the world is changing.

As I noted above, we had a good thing going with our AEC for many years. The AEC hadn't evolved a whole lot for a couple of decades, except for some minor changes that were fun to conceive and incorporate into the conference design. No more. The changes we have made over just the last three years to this event have been breathtaking.

Instead of complaining about the new normals impacting us, we've ridden them with a fiery determination to build an annual event for you that has no parallel. I say that not to sell you on attending our next conference, which will be in June 2012 in the heart of downtown San Diego, right on the waterfront. I say that to ensure that you know that we understand that adaptations are necessary and that we'll go through the pain of making them because we strive for nothing less than a high-value, high-energy, highly relevant, and highly memorable conference for you.

And that . . . is a statement about NEHA much more than it is a statement about our AEC.

Below I cite many of the adaptations that we have made to our conference. The length and substantive nature of this list hopefully convey the message that we are willing to do what it takes to stay current and to give you the best possible conference experience we can.

- Out of respect for the different and preferred ways of learning across the generations, we have developed two different

methods for delivering education at the AEC. We continue to feature the standard lecture for those who prefer to learn in this way. We have also been building many more interactive learning experiences for those who prefer to learn through experience and interaction.

- Because of the premium that employers are now putting on getting something back for their money, NEHA has made an all-out effort to develop a documentable return on investment experience for some of our most popular educational tracks. We have revised our programming in such a way that we can now actually demonstrate that attendees are obtaining the kind of education and training that will enable them to more than pay for their conference expenses through their new-found abilities to implement cost savings and revenue enhancements back at their places of employment.
- In response to your need for superior education and training, we have hired professional environmental health staff to develop and organize the conference educational program instead of leaving this hugely important function to volunteers. In this way we can exercise quality control and collaborations in far more effective ways than was possible through a system of volunteers.
- Because of our member's interest in connecting more with local policy makers, we have opened up new programming to allow policy makers to meet environmental health people and to develop a greater appreciation for all that environmental health does.
- To accommodate those many NEHA members who cannot afford to go to the AEC in a given year, we have invested in building a virtual conference that allows people to access conference content and even interact with on-site attendees in real time without being there themselves.
- In recognition of the financial challenges that many NEHA members are having in getting to the AEC, NEHA has created a scholarship program that now contributes to the expenses of over 50 attendees.
- We have revamped our section chair program, which relied on having volunteers for each topic section of the conference. We are now implementing a much more robust system of NEHA technical advisors

that will allow us to access considerably more subject-matter expertise from the membership and to use that expertise for many more programs than just the AEC. This also opens up more volunteer opportunities for the NEHA membership.

- In response to the growing interest within the membership to give back, we now regularly feature a fun but meaningful community service event at the AEC that is consistent with environmental health considerations.
- Out of respect for the growing concern about green meetings especially within the environmental niche where NEHA resides, we have made significant strides in greening our conference and reducing our carbon footprint.
- In recognition of the fact that many employers are better able to fund training experiences as opposed to educational experiences, we have given additional emphasis to training within our conference program.
- Given the state of the economy and the challenges that other organizations are also facing, we have moved much more aggressively into co-locating our conference with other organizations. Co-locating improves our numbers but also opens up many more networking opportunities for our attendees with colleagues whom they are not likely to meet otherwise.
- Out of respect for the time and financial constraints that our members have, we have shortened the annual conference by a day.
- In response to the interest in having more timely education, we have tried to spotlight more emerging issues in our programming. In recent years we have addressed current issues such as bed bugs, pandemic flu, earthquakes in Haiti, technology advances in environmental health, and even the fate of environmental health in these difficult times.
- In light of the rapid growth of social networking, we have created platforms that enable our attendees to use social media in conjunction with their overall conference experience.
- Finally, recognizing the fact that our conference has become so much more than simply some hours in a classroom, we have rebuilt the conference to be a modular

event. We now point out the many facets of our conference and how each person can arrange these facets to design a conference experience that is most valuable to them.

I hope it is clear that any one of these changes would have constituted a major change in the nature of our annual event. Taken together (to say nothing of how quickly all of these adaptations have been implemented), this long list demonstrates indeed how responsive NEHA is to socioeconomic trends sweeping our profession. The list also shows that your association understands that evolution is the natural order and that we are committed to being a part of the change process and not a victim of it. Really, there is no other choice! 🐛

Nelson E. Fabian

nfabian@neha.org

4 good reasons

to promptly renew your
National Environmental
Health Association
(NEHA) membership!

1. You won't miss a single issue of this *Journal*!
2. Your membership benefits continue.
3. You conserve NEHA's resources by eliminating costly renewal notices.
4. You support advocacy on behalf of environmental health.



Presby Environmental

The Next Generation of Wastewater Treatment Technology

Advanced Enviro-Septic® (AES) Onsite Wastewater Treatment System

- ✓ Removes up to 99% of wastewater contaminants
- ✓ Treats and disperses in the same footprint
- ✓ Flexible and sloping designs
- ✓ Passive/non-mechanical
- ✓ HUBZone Certified
- ✓ Cost-effective




NSF
SPD & CTD Models
Certified to NSF/ANSI
Standard 40 Class I

Made in USA

To find out what AES can do for you, visit...

www.PresbyEnvironmental.com • 800-473-5298

Did You Know?

NEHA's Food Handler Training Certificate Program is now accredited by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). Find out more at nehatraining.org.