

Managing Editor's Desk

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The Tucson AEC—Like No Other

Last December, I had the pleasure of attending two seasonal concerts—one performed by the Trans-Siberian Orchestra (TSO) and the other performed by Mannheim Steamroller. I don't listen to much Christmas music anymore. But in listening to these performances and discovering how pleasingly the modern renditions of old favorites caught my ear, I was hit by a realization. If you can take something meant for a previous era and repackage it to fit modern times, you can make that older product come alive again! (Hollywood does this with multi-million dollar remakes of old movies all the time.)

I mention this experience to set the stage for one of the most revolutionary stories in NEHA's history. This story, too, is about taking something that has been done one way for decades and reshaping it to fit the world that we now live and work in.

To be more specific, for a good 71 years, NEHA has successfully sponsored an annual conference for the benefit of those who practice environmental health. Interestingly, the basic template for our annual conference hasn't much changed over this long history. By contrast, the world around us has changed dramatically. Moreover, the experts are telling us that the pace of change in today's world is, if anything, accelerating.

This reality raises the question: Is our annual conference—or at least the way in which we organize this event—still relevant? Is there anything we can do to modernize our conference and transform it into something that offers greater value and meaning for the world of today? Is our conference ripe for a TSO makeover?! After all, if our conference isn't meaningful, exciting, contemporary, and fun, why even bother?—since those are the crite-

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ria that society tends to use today to judge whether something is successful or not.

I'll spare you the details, but the meeting literature is in fact full of stories calling for associations like ours to change the way we provide education. We are being admonished, for example, to make our annual conference events more appealing—especially to younger generations whose methods of learning differ greatly from those used for years by the baby boomers (for whom conferences are primarily designed).

Paying heed to those calls for change, late last summer we began an intensive process within our staff to re-examine the fundamental structure of our annual conference and see where modernization might be possible. We began our quest for change by taking unbiased looks at what drew people to other large-scale events. We asked: What constitutes the appeal of other such events that would cause individuals to spend their time and money to attend? We looked at events ranging from a political rally to the Emmy

Awards, a religious service, a Cirque du Soleil performance, the Burning Cross Ceremony, a city fair festival, and so forth.

In addition, we spent time looking at the differences in a multi-generational workforce and how the learning preferences of generations X and Y differ from those of the baby boomers. We also searched for ways to accentuate the “community” experience of our attendees.

Once we felt that we had a better understanding of the appeal of modern-day events, the educational preferences of the younger generations, and the ways “community” could be better factored into a conference design, we set about looking for ways to modernize NEHA's Annual Educational Conference (AEC). Our aim was nothing less than to create something that would have appeal across the generations, something that would be fun, exciting, and rewarding for all.

The result of our work is one of the most innovative products that NEHA has ever come up with. In June, we will be offering our attendees a two-campus conference that will be held at two beautiful resort hotels. (Continuous free shuttle service between the two campuses will be provided.) At the Westin campus (or “Lecture Hall”), we will feature a full slate of lectures typical of the kind of high-powered education that we have offered for years. At the Hilton campus (or “Learning Laboratory”), we will be offering many very unusual forms of education that will be much more geared toward interaction, demonstrations, group participation, and personalization.

Just to whet your appetite: At the Learning Laboratory, we plan to provide a form of “speed dating” education in which we will have experts available for short counseling ses-

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actions. Comments came back from industry and stakeholders that these guidance documents were useful but that FDA should find a way to simplify the messages. With this in mind, FDA has repackaged the information into self-assessment tools, one of which is appended to each guidance document.



Information on Lead in Toys

www.healthytoys.org

www.momsrising.org/NoToxicToys

The Ecology Center and the Washington Toxics Coalition (WTC) have been testing children's toys for lead and other harmful chemicals. Experts at WTC test the toys by using an X-ray fluorescence (XRF) analyzer to look for the presence of chemicals such as lead, cadmium, arsenic, and chlorine (the latter to determine the presence of polyvinyl chloride, or PVC plastic).

Results of the testing can be found at the first of the URLs listed above. In addition to identifying toys and other items (such as toothbrushes) that contain contaminants, the site provides a list of lead-free toys.

The second URL provides information on a fast and easy way shoppers can learn if particular toys contain toxins. MomsRising has developed a text messaging system that provides access to the HealthyToys.org database. Using their cell phones, parents can simply text "healthytoys" and the name of a particular toy, the name of a type of toy, or the name of a toy manufacturer or retailer to 41411 to find out whether a toy is toxic. MomsRising will respond instantly with a message based on comprehensive tests of the more than 1,200 toys featured at HealthyToys.org.



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sions that will enable attendees to get specific answers to specific questions. We are envisioning a variety of role-playing exercises in which attendees will learn by actually participating in their education. We are looking at forming small learning communities that will enable attendees to learn from a group of people seeking knowledge in similar topic areas. We are also looking at "design education" in which attendees actually build something with the help of an expert facilitator. We are considering posting a conference "wiki" that will enable attendees to educate each other on topical environmental health issues. We're even looking at "backwards education," in which attendees will learn from the mistakes and missteps made by others. And so forth. (We are also threading into the conference many opportunities for community and relationship building.)

We intend for the learning lab to be fun, novel, dynamic, and, to a large extent, self-driven.

At no time in almost a century of providing continuing education to this profession has NEHA ever been this daring. On the other hand, at no time have we felt the pressure to deliver a high-quality educational program that is so in sync with the times.

The membership deserves to know that we are fully committed to this effort and that we

go into it with a sense of obligation to you—our members. We want you to be proud of how far ahead of the game *your* professional society is.

But wait ... there's even more!

For one thing, we are presenting this cutting-edge conference experience at two absolutely beautiful resort hotels. Come to Tucson to become better educated, to learn how to do your job better, to develop and nurture professional relationships—and to enjoy one of the most pleasurable overall experiences that a person can enjoy.

For another, NEHA has made the commitment to make this AEC the "greenest" conference that we have ever held. To some extent, our commitment to make this a green event is further evidence of our determination to create something that is right for the times. But our efforts in this direction are influenced even more by the fact that going green is our duty. NEHA is many things to many people. At our core, however, is the fundamental point that we are a profession that understands and respects the need for a healthful environment. How could we honor the people we serve if we built anything other than a green conference?

We have therefore been busily at work to include locally grown organic food in our food and beverages, reduce the volume of conference paper, get our host hotels to implement

green policies, promote the conference with as little paper as possible, provide opportunities for conference attendees to purchase carbon offsets, and use recyclable and organic materials as much as possible in our conference supplies. And those examples are just for starters.

I began by titling this column "The Tucson AEC—Like No Other." Never in my 26 years with the association have I seen such a major program undergo such major changes. If you listen carefully enough, you might even hear some TSO music in the background while in Tucson!

To keep you as up to date as possible on the emerging conference details, we encourage you to visit the NEHA Web site at www.neha.org. Here you will find the latest information on this exciting conference experience. We will also be frequently e-mailing the membership to cut down on paper promotionals. If we don't have your e-mail address, please be sure to send it in to staff@neha.org.

Many people—volunteers and staff—have helped to make this unique conference possible. We hope that it will soon be our pleasure to see you there and to have the delight of helping you to enjoy what may very well be our finest moment.

See you in Tucson! 