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Confessions of a Conference Chair

Overseeing a meeting with thousands of people is a daunting task, writes Sheldon H. Jacobson, who shares some lessons he learned along the way.

By [Sheldon H. Jacobson](#)



Now that COVID has become much less pervasive, more academics are attending in-person and hybrid professional meetings. Those meetings offer a forum for networking and lively discussions and debates and can foster new research collaborations. They are a lifeline for many

scholars when it comes to reaching their professional community, and they significantly enrich the environment of curiosity and discovery that is the hallmark of academe.

Yet who organizes such meetings? Whether a few hundred people are gathering on a campus or thousands of attendees are meeting in a large city convention center, the effort to bring participants together is not a trivial or simple one.

Throughout my career, I swore to never be involved in such an undertaking, as it appeared to be a thankless job full of innumerable headaches and few benefits. That is, until I was approached to do so.

My primary professional community is the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences, or INFORMS. With just over 10,000 members, INFORMS holds an annual meeting in the fall that many of its members from academe and some from industry attend.

When the INFORMS vice president of meetings first approached me, back in 2019, to be the general chair for the 2022 annual meeting in Indianapolis, my proximity to that city weighed favorably in his mind, with Illinois located just west of Indiana. Though I was reticent to make such a commitment, I learned I would be given the freedom to organize the meeting as I saw fit, including handpicking a meeting committee of volunteer colleagues that would be supported by an experienced professional staff.

Overseeing a meeting with thousands of people is a daunting task. However, one thing that INFORMS does exceptionally well, as do many professional associations and societies, is meetings. In our case, with around one-third of those people first-time attendees, we wanted to give them a product that they would appreciate and a reason to look forward to participating in the next meeting in 2023.

Fortunately, the INFORMS staff provides a year-to-year consistency that keeps planning milestones on track, on target and in order. However, as the general chair, along with other leaders of the conference planning team, we still had to quickly get up to speed when it came to the broader programmatic elements, which required meeting deadlines and engaging the membership.

We all worked hard, and the result of our efforts was that more than 6,000 people enjoyed the society's first fully in-person annual meeting since 2019. Attendance exceeded expectations by almost 50 percent, with people thrilled to be back in person and to see some of their colleagues for the first time in more than two years. The networking events were appropriately crowded, and technical session rooms were uniformly filled to near capacity.

Along the way, I learned a number of lessons that I'd like to share about how to best fulfill the role of the top chair of a major academic conference.

- **Recruit the best people for the conference committee.** Getting the right individuals on your team is crucial. I handpicked my two program co-chairs, one of whom I have

collaborated with in the past. He is an over-the-top responsible and detailed person. The second co-chair was a Ph.D. student of mine at Illinois. I knew that he would be a superb first lieutenant. I also picked a general co-chair to help me keep track of minutiae that invariably arose that required attention. She was an ideal fit for this role. The four of us assembled a team of other co-chairs in charge of such areas as poster sessions, plenary and keynote talks, and tutorials that would be similarly responsible and forward-thinking.

- **Empower those people.** How could we keep those co-chairs and other people engaged when their day jobs were constantly tugging at them? We stood behind the people we recruited, not in front of them. We did not take on their tasks, even when it would have been easy to do so. As such, everyone felt empowered; every co-chair was in charge of their specific responsibilities. We also held monthly Zoom meetings and regularly kept the entire team updated, informed on progress and engaged. By creating such a welcoming environment, everyone felt appreciated and part of something bigger than themselves.
- **Focus on succeeding, not on avoiding failure.** We wanted to make changes that served the best interests of our academic community and its members. The biggest change was no Wednesday technical sessions, which typically included contributed research paper presentations. They've been a bane of meetings for decades, since many people departed from the meeting on Wednesday morning, making such sessions poorly attended. Yet no one was willing to put them to rest.

We did. Our committee focused on how to achieve this and found a workable path forward. It involved no designated lunch hour (shorter lines at local restaurants) and a new type of talk, labeled a flash talk. Flash talks, offered at different times than that final Wednesday, provided many students and younger researchers the opportunity to share their research ideas in a more informal setting. It gave presenters a much larger audience and more opportunities to interact with fellow presenters and attendees.

Any time changes are made, there are risks—in this case, attendees and presenters could have rebelled against this new presentation format. However, the risks are often worth taking. If it failed, we would have learned from it. If it succeeded, future meetings would benefit from our experiment. Fortunately, it succeeded, providing a road map for future meetings to emulate if they so wished.

- **Engage the community.** We kept potential attendees aware of the meeting by reaching out to community leaders like department heads and deans, offering opportunities for greater visibility through exhibits and sponsorship. Many were grateful for the chance to contribute and help the meeting be a success. It also helped us learn more about what people were looking for from the meeting. Our goal was to deliver a product that people wanted and needed, as well as to, in fact, exceed people's expectations. Based on feedback, we achieved this objective. More tangibly, the amount of sponsorship provided by community leaders reached record levels.

- **Recognize that you can't keep everyone happy.** No matter what you do, not everyone will be happy. Accept that human nature has a variety of interests and that trying to please everyone guarantees failure. Focus on delivering a meeting that has value across multiple dimensions and allow members to find what best works for them. That included a breadth of plenaries and keynotes that brought nontraditional people into our community, networking events that offered both interesting venues and great food, and opportunities to learn more about advocacy and communication. Such a smorgasbord of activities gave everyone something they could latch on to in order to help them feel that the meeting was special for them.
- **Expect the unexpected.** Hiccups will occur. You will occasionally be blindsided. People assume that, as the chair, anything that is part of the program is your doing even when you know nothing about it. Going with the flow and listening to those impacted is a safe response. People are most interested in being heard. Many times, your response will be less important than just listening and giving people the attention that they feel they need.
- **Depend on and trust the professional staff—but not too much.** The INFORMS staff had a template to get things done. They knew what to do, since they have been running meetings for many years. But if we on the conference committee wanted to make changes, we had to initiate it. When we provided input or came up with ideas, they responded ably. Their job was to put the meeting together from a practical and organizational basis. Our job was to deliver a memorable, engaging and valuable experience for attendees.

My final piece of advice is that, if you are approached to be part of a professional meeting planning committee, please give it serious consideration. Is the work time-consuming? Yes. Is it worth doing? Definitely. After it is all said and done, you will be grateful for the opportunity, and the attendees will be grateful for your efforts.

Sheldon H. Jacobson is a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His passion for service, giving back and making a difference motivated him to serve as the general chair of the 2022 INFORMS annual meeting in Indianapolis. The superb team that he worked with deserves all the credit for making the meeting a success.