

Booth sessions: a critical assessment

Booth sessions, also known as "poster sessions," are attracting attention among the planners and participants of large conferences. In this format, a contributor is assigned a booth with display board and table and gives his talk to those who stop and inquire. Because discussion can go both ways, the visitor experiences better retention of information and the booth keeper benefits from pertinent comments about his work.

Booth sessions have been tried at only a few conferences—one was arranged as a limited experiment for the IX International Conference on the Physics of Electronic and Atomic Collisions (IC-PEAC) held in Seattle, 24–30 July 1975. This letter gives the major findings of the experiment and offers suggestions for future booth-session organizers and contributors.

The conference was held at the University of Washington. Over 640 people attended the program, which consisted of 566 contributed papers and 63 invited lectures. Except for a break on the weekend, each day was usually filled by six parallel sessions of invited and contributed papers. On the second day, a booth session was scheduled from 2:00 to 3:30 pm and all contributed papers for that period were presented in the new format. The total number of booths, 63,



luck with this experiment, but please remove me from your list of booth papers. (You may possibly want to convert the space you had planned to assign to me into a refreshment booth)."

When the session opened, the hallways were crowded with curious and interested visitors. In some respects it did resemble a bazaar—displays varied from standard black-and-white drawings to elaborate color presentations. In one instance, the contribution was completely written out on the display board. An enterprising group enticed customers to their booth with cheese and crackers.

To help evaluate the experiment, each conference participant was given a questionnaire. Over 100 responded, or 15% of the people attending the conference.

Among the respondents, more than 85% were satisfied with the booth session as a form of communication as experienced at the conference. Nine percent thought it was outstanding, 60% successful and 17% adequate. Two-thirds believed the booth sessions were better than the short, contributed presentations while 20% found them to be worse. A large percentage, 80%, said they would participate in booth sessions on a voluntary basis. Of those participants who were also booth operators only 15% found time to visit other

booths. Half of all booth presentations were shared with the help of a colleague.

The assessment of the booth sessions included specific suggestions. The following is a condensation of those ideas:

The booth session allows the presenter to go into detail, ask questions, react. It is successful in terms of individual interactions because it provides a vehicle that enables people to identify themselves and their work outside a formal session. At an international meeting it provides also an opportunity for non-English speaking participants to converse in other languages.

Some said that all contributed papers should be replaced with booth sessions, but others countered that the booth session is less effective than the ten-minute presentation. Many suggested that booth sessions be held every day, perhaps limited to 15–20 booths (which could be made available for further use by those who have already presented papers).

Conversations at the booth sometimes are incomplete and chaotic. The normal short presentation forces a scientist to think and weigh the importance of his material to be presented. Regular sessions provide also a broader means of communication that appeals to those who have a general interest in a problem.

Booth sessions allow good dialogue with five or six colleagues during the one-and-a-half hour session. However, this means repeating the presentation five or six times and reaching only that number of people. These sessions are more tiring, both for the visitor and booth operator. For conference organizers the booth sessions offer an opportunity to deal with the few participants who contribute several papers seemingly for the purpose of increasing their exposure time in front of a captive audience.

A major criticism of the organization of the booth sessions for the conference was that the booth managers had no opportunities to visit other booths. This was a serious drawback, especially for those working in an area covered in the single booth session. A frequent suggestion is to limit the number of papers (six) on a given topic in the same booth session. To enable the booth holder to visit other booths, each could be closed in sequence for a half-hour time period.

For more efficient use of the allotted

GUEST COMMENT by John S. Risley

was about equal to the number of ten-minute, contributed papers that could be scheduled in six parallel, one-and-a-half hour sessions.

The program committee selected the general topics for booth presentation virtually at random—implying no judgment, whether favorable or unfavorable, on the importance of these topics. However, each topic included papers by some senior, well-known investigators to give the experiment a fair test.

Before the conference started, a potential booth participant, disillusioned by the idea, wrote to us stating: "... I find that I would rather not be included as a participant. The resemblance to a bazaar or the vendor's booths at an APS meeting is just too much for my taste, I wish you

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ime, the booth keeper should talk to all interested people. Often more aggressive, knowledgeable persons dominate the conversation. Discussion with a single person should be limited to five minutes to give others an opportunity to ask questions or discuss other problems.

More effective displays are suggested. In addition to the sign containing the booth number, title and list of authors, another should state the purpose of the experiment or theory and give the principal results. Investigators should emphasize their major points with a large poster. If the displayed material is reasonably complete, booth holders will be able to use their time for answering questions. An "out-to-lunch" sign is needed for each booth announcing the presenter's time of return when visiting other booths.

One participant recommended that the services of a consultant in visual-aid techniques be acquired with the aim of producing a short pamphlet containing suggestions as to how booths might be most effectively manned.

The results of our experiment with the booth sessions at the IX ICPEAC indicate that they are effective in facilitating informal but intense discussions between specialists in a particular field.

This type of session is not a substitute for the more conventional short presentation to a larger audience. Booth sessions have the most value when scheduled as auxiliary sessions, with contributors signing up for booth space on a voluntary basis. There seems to be no clearcut advantage in arranging scores of booths rather than many parallel sessions. (A more complete version of this report may be obtained directly from the author.)

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5/7/76

Re-inventing the fireplace

In "Efficient Use of Energy" (August 1975, page 23) the authors offer suggestions for improvement of the energy efficiency of home heating. They point out that "economy involves locating the crucial stage of energy conservation at the site of its end use." And they suggest that fuel be burned in "room radiators" at low temperature, by use of some type of catalyst yet to be developed.

It seems that this is a re-invention of the fireplace, but with unnecessarily sophisticated and inefficient modification to low-temperature operation.

The authors themselves concede that high-temperature heat sources offer better second-law efficiency than low-temperature heat sources. It is far from clear why low-temperature operation is recommended.

A further great advantage of high-temperature operation derives from the fact that at high temperatures, one can produce radiant heat with increasing efficiency; and radiant heat offers a double advantage over convective heat from furnace-based systems. Radiant heat can be beamed toward the user¹, and it can be absorbed directly by the user. Convected heat only controls the rate of heat loss by the body, and requires the heating of large masses of air and of structural interiors merely to keep a thin layer of air next to the skin within the zone of comfort.

Reference

1. L. Cranberg, "Slot-Stable Flame with Hohlraum Radiation Pattern," Bulletin, APS, Sept., 1975, p. 1183; "The Physicist's Fire," Time Magazine, Dec. 1975, p. 52.

LAWRENCE CRANBERG

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Austin, Texas

More on coal vs. fission

In his letter (June, page 77) on the hazards of air pollution, J. H. Ray compares the radioactive dispersion of fossil-fueled and nuclear-fueled power plants, expressed in quantities proportional to the electric power produced. He concludes that nuclear reactors emit 5×10^2 – 10^6 times less radioactivity than fossil-fueled power stations. Because it has been illustrated that the most important components of coal pollution, Ra^{226} and its daughters, represent not only a local but also a long-term problem (Zbigniew Jaworowski, Health Phys. 20, 499, 1971), this letter will illustrate that Ray's argument is based on an irrelevant comparison that is common in the nuclear controversy. In his author's comment, J. Devaney (page 78) extends this reasoning erroneously.

When comparing the radioactive dispersion of pollutants in the atmosphere due to 1000 megawatt years of electricity production by a coal or nuclear power plant, one has to take into account all releases during the whole fuel cycle and not only those during the power-production phase.

According to Jaworowski, the radium activity from coal varies from 0.001 to 1.3 picocuries/gram, depending on the type and origin of coal. From his data, we calculate that a 1000-MWe coal plant should produce yearly a minimum of 4.7 microcuries (for 99.8% dust-filter efficiency and 0.001 pCi/gm coal specific activity) to a maximum of 570 millicuries (75%, 1.3 pCi/gm). The average for European and Asian coals varies between 1.4 and 170 mCi.

Around coal plants the radium activity can be considerable, and a worldwide dispersion is noticed. However, this pollution can easily be reduced by classical control techniques. The efficiency of the dust collector can decrease the radium

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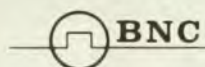
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