The future of meeting exhibitions

In his column titled "The future of meetings" (PHYSICS TODAY, February 2021, page 8), Charles Day expresses doubts that exhibitors will return to scientific meetings once the COVID pandemic eases. As someone who has attended every American Physical Society (APS) March Meeting as an exhibitor for the past 20 years, I would like to offer a different perspective.

It is easy to forget that the scientific enterprise is a very human endeavor. Behind each publication, each new result, each grant proposal are people with wants and needs, aspirations and worries. The same is true for the manufacturers of scientific equipment, authors of software packages, and publishers of journals. COVID-19 has forced us apart for public safety, but we should not mistake that necessity as a step toward ever-increasing efficiency.

Yes, it can be tedious packing up our portable booths and product samples and sending them with our team to different convention centers. It would be easier to stay home and to tell ourselves a story about how virtual webinars can replace seeing and talking to researchers face to face. But there is a trap in seeking to rationalize every expenditure of time and money with a narrowly defined return on investment. Exhibiting at the APS March Meeting and other conferences is about more than generating a list of leads.

The human face we present to each other on the exhibit floor brings the technical and commercial down to the personal. Sometimes I spend 20 or 30 minutes talking with a graduate student about how they might improve a measurement using equipment they already have in their lab. I greatly enjoy seeing the same people year after year during our brief time to catch up, seeing careers progress, and occasionally being able to connect people who have a shared problem or interest. The return on such investments is measured over decades, not quarters.

Matt Kowitt (left) speaks to three 2015 March Meeting attendees about new Stanford Research Systems instruments. (Courtesy of M. Kowitt.)

And they humanize what we all do: They're reminders that on both sides of each purchase order or technical support call there are real people—people that we get to know and care about, whose judgments we learn to trust, and who ultimately drive our collective effort forward.

So long as APS invites exhibitors to join the March Meeting, Stanford Research Systems and I will be there to meet old friends and make new ones, show our new instruments, and have some fun in the process.

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Leaving politics aside

David Kramer's story "The undermining of science is Trump's legacy" (PHYSICS TODAY, March 2021, page 24) was much too political for a magazine like PHYSICS TODAY. In a nutshell, the article said that climate science was de-emphasized, while artificial intelligence, quantum information science, and biotechnology were enhanced. Every administration emphasizes some areas of science and de-emphasizes others. The article admitted that R&D funding was increased to $165 billion from $118 billion over Donald Trump's presidency. That does not sound like "searing pain" to me. Kramer's report also made gratuitous insults to William Happer and Steven Koonin, scientists with at least the credentials of the others mentioned.

The development of the COVID-19 vaccines in one year instead of the normal 5–10 was an enormous scientific and industrial achievement spearheaded by Trump. There is still the problem of distribution, of course, but if the country is largely vaccinated by summer, it will be a great accomplishment, with credit to be shared by both the Trump and Biden administrations.

Better PHYSICS TODAY should stick to physics and leave the condemnation or praise of politicians to other media outlets.

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