

Q&A Session

Boston Section Shares Its Formula for Success

Steve: The Ichthyologists [Boston Section] have doubled meeting attendance over the last year, including holding a Student Night that was attended by 250 students and AIChE professionals (Nov. 2004; p. 61). In addition, you are in the process of tripling your member volunteer participation. How have you accomplished so much so quickly?

Rob: First, we tried to learn more about what our members wanted, adjusted our programming accordingly, and then marketed aggressively to get our message out to the members. We conducted an extensive online market survey. The process started by polling other sections through the Local Sections message board. This is a powerful tool, and I strongly recommend all sections to take advantage of it. It allows you to leverage the experiences of other sections nationwide. Through the message board, we were able to get some useful feedback about the successes and failures of other sections' market surveys, as well as find out what their most popular topics were over the past several years. Using this information as a starting point, we created a list of 20 meeting topics to test through a market survey.

Steve: So what did you learn?

Rob: Three key interests surfaced. First, members want to come to meetings that relate to their personal career success, and not just for topics that are interesting. Emerging technologies in the alternative energy field, such as solar power, wind power and fuel cells all scored high, as well as topics such as "Future Trends in Chemical Engineering," and biotechnology related topics. Second, we learned that people attend meetings 50% for the topic and 50% to make business connections. And third, members want to extend their career networking by becoming more involved with our section.

Steve: How have you implemented these results?

Rob: We built a new 10-person program committee out of the members who expressed interest via the survey, and turned the survey results over to them. Ana Echaniz, our program chair last year, did a superb job of directing this new committee.

Andy: One of the things Ana introduced was the concept of having a different meeting coordinator for each meeting. In keeping with our Ichthyologists' tradition of using fish names, they are called the Octopus. We selected the top choices on the survey and



"Offishers" at the Nov. 5th AIChE Boston Process Intensification Meeting. From left to right: Al Porras (Past Chair '02-'03); Andy Irwin (Vice Chair); Bill Flood (Past Chair '72-'73); Ana Echaniz (Past Program Chair); and Rob Reintjes (Chair).

let the program committee figure out the best way to give the members what they wanted.

Steve: What is the connection between increasing the number of your volunteers and career networking?

Rob: The volunteer program is an extension of our emphasis on career networking. Members are discovering they can make much better business contacts, as well as showcasing their professional skills by becoming more active within the Ichthyologists.

Steve: How do you coordinate the volunteers who want to get more involved?

Rob: First, we created a new "Offisher" position — Volunteer Coordinator — and recruited Rich Shandross to take on this important role. Rich uses the term "enlightened self-interest" to help members understand our philosophy in working with volunteers.

Rich: We want our volunteers to get the most out of the time they spend helping the organization. We ask them what they want to achieve as a result of their volunteer work, so that we can match their goals with our needs to the extent possible.

Steve: What are some of the benefits of being a Boston Section volunteer?

James: For me, it is definitely the networking and learning professional skills from others, such as how to write proposals, interact with government agencies, and deliver presentations. It is much easier to meet and engage other professionals when you are visible in the organization. A network is the enabler of synergy and opportunity, for personal and professional growth.

Steve: How does "enlightened self-interest fit" into the team building process?

Steve Horstkamp

AIChE Local Sections Vice-Chair
Account Engineer,
Chemical Operations, FM Global

Rob Reintjes

Boston Section Chair (Kingfish)
Principal, New England Equity Group
www.newenglandequity.com

Andy Irwin

Boston Section Vice-Chair and Program
Chair (Mackerel and Flounder)
President, IRWIN Engineers, Inc.

James Cross

Boston Section Secretary and Treasurer
(Smelt and Shark)
Vice President Technology,
Nuvera Fuel Cells

Rich Shandross

Boston Section Volunteer Coordinator
(Anglerfish)
Principal Member, Technical Staff,
General Dynamics C4 Systems

Rich: We use an HR-like process in working with our volunteers. To get the best fit between our requirements and the skills, interests and networking goals of the volunteer, we have all potential volunteers fill out a Volunteer Profile form. The responses are entered in a database for easy access.

Rob: Another way to look at this is from a ROI, standpoint. Members invest their time, a very scarce resource today, in order to come to meetings or to help the section as volunteers. It is the primary responsibility of the Section Chair and the rest of their management team to make sure that the members get the maximum return on this investment of their time.

Visit www.aiche-boston.org to learn more about the Ichthyologists (Boston Section).