The Benefits of In-Person Conferences

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To start, I want to thank all of our members for the honor of being the 2021 Florida Section chair. I will do my best to uphold the tradition of excellence from my predecessors.

It's unfortunate that we were unable to have our normal transition from Kim Kowalski to me at our luncheon that's usually held at the section's Fall Conference. Likewise, it's unfortunate that we will not be having a Florida Water Resources Conference (FWRC) in 2021, and in 2020, we didn't have either FWRC or the AWWA Annual Conference and Exposition (ACE20), which was supposed to be in Orlando.

So that means it has been over a year since we had a statewide conference for the water industry in Florida. Darn COVID-19! The hope is that we can get back to live conference events later this year because they are important to our industry and to all of us as social creatures.

Conferences Mimic Civilization

The reasons should be obvious. As civilization has grown over the centuries, the advancements in our technology, and new means and methods, have occurred in cities where many people can gather in one place, meet, discuss issues, and arrive at solutions based on each other's experiences, something that cannot be done in rural areas.

Conferences are intended to achieve a similar goal: bring people with common interests and facing similar challenges together to discuss their issues and find new ideas to improve service delivery.

As a result, there are three basic goals that happen at these conferences:

- Talking to vendors who have products that might help a utility or meet certain needs.
- Sitting in on technical sessions allows the listeners to learn how other utilities approach solutions to their challenges.
- Talking with other utility and engineering personnel about common problems.

All of these have great potential for ideas to help utilities. The opportunity to share a beverage and share a meal helps facilitate this further. We can also connect with many friends that we seem to only see at conferences—even if they work only a few miles away.

2020 Fall Conference

The good news is that for our virtual 2020 FSAWWA Fall Conference, held last December, we met at least one of the goals I just mentioned. The number of people attending concurrent technical sessions and workshops are shown in the blue box.

The numbers were not too far behind the 2019 numbers for in-person technical sessions. Having them all recorded makes them easier to view later (we are no longer tracking the views). Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), COVID-19 testing in wastewater, supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) to help improve operations, and potable reuse remain hot topics to carry forward.

Many people realize that despite the limitations of distance viewing, a good discussion can yield a solution or idea that can solve an ongoing issue. How others approach the problem may shed light on how your utility can address its challenges.

Having watched many of the presentations, and having reviewed all the abstracts and papers, there was a lot of good stuff to share.

Looking to the Future

By the summer, we hope to have live events again, if we can roll out the vaccine better than we did in December; however, going forward, there are several challenges we may face. Many of our municipal utility officials were or may still be on travel bans due to COVID-19. Because the economy has not fully rebounded and the state is talking about cutting education and health services due to lower tax receipts, I am concerned that the one-size-fits-all mentality on municipal budgets may impact us in 2021, even though most utilities are not seeing large reductions in revenues. Instead, we need to make the officials in charge of budgets understand that the savings of just one good idea learned at a conference can easily exceed the cost of attendance, as opposed to...
travel and training being an easy place to cut. The return on investment (ROI) is extremely high if just one great idea can be put into practice.

More important still, we need to convey these solutions to the officials who have control of the budget attributed to attendance at conferences. Conveying this data is a form of marketing—touting the benefits of learning new things that we often miss due to all the other work we must do. But we must market!

Another challenge is increasing the number of people attending the conference; in particular, the number of young people attending. Many of the people who go to conferences bring a wealth of knowledge and experience. Connecting young professionals and college students with seasoned veterans can help long-term knowledge transfer.

Access to social media that young professionals use may also help us convey to the public what we accomplish. Most water industry efforts are simply taken for granted. We need to do a better job of marketing these benefits, and we need to raise awareness of the essential work we do. Without water and sewage, well—let’s not go there.

We would not have civilization without water and sewer services. That is why they are essential services, and we are essential personnel. Most people do not realize this, which is something that we need to change. For giggles I did a water plant tour with middle schoolers a couple years ago. I asked which they would prefer: three days without their cell phone or three days without water, which could literally kill them. Way too many wanted that cell phone!

Next month we hope to have all the awardees listed here in the magazine. In the meantime, to all those in our industry—operators, engineers, administrators, support staff, contractors, and suppliers—who make this industry vibrant and keep our economic and social system going, thank you for all you do.

Stay safe!