An industry and a profusion of conferences

Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan is known for accessing little-known statistics to ascertain the health of our nation's economy. I would suggest he use one additional new indicator: the number of industry conferences.

Are these constant events a reflection of the rapidly evolving technology sector, or simply speculative excess?

Several categories of conferences exist.

The most legitimate gatherings are the industry-association annual events. These allow the people of an entire industry to congregate, network amongst themselves, discuss issues of common concern and display products and services.

In the transportation industry, among the most widely known associations are the National Industrial Transportation League, the Intermodal Association of North America, the American Trucking Associations and the American Association of Port Authorities.

Industry associations are hearing their members tell them that less is more. The American Trucking Associations' recent restructuring and elimination of many industry councils is a direct attempt to reduce the number of annual meetings — there were more than 50 — and concentrate on industry advocacy.

This November, the NIT League, the Intermodal Association of North America and the Transportation Intermediaries Association will hold a joint meeting in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. The combined event is a reaction to industry trends.

Industry consolidation means there are fewer companies to participate. Corporate downsizing means there are fewer people to attend. Industry maturation means there are fewer meaningful topics to discuss. Holding joint meetings is good economics and good member service.

Then we have the annual event, such as the International Intermodal Expo. Born out of a single conference, the Expo became an annual happening as the intermodal industry blossomed. This conference has recently undergone an intense period of self-evaluation, from which it should emerge stronger.

The Georgia Freight Bureau and the Intermodal Association of North America, the Expo's organizers, recognized that while the show was noteworthy in the industry, it needed to change.

Starting this year, the Expo will be held only every other year; the next will be in 2002. The organizers also modified the program to include fewer sessions — and of a higher quality.

In the absence of the Expo in 2001, other events — usually held for profit — will seek to fill the void. However, buyer beware. You must evaluate upcoming shows with a critical eye.

First, look for the real motive of the sponsor(s). Whether the show is intended as a profit-maker or an educational event will be reflected by the price.

I am intrigued by the number of conferences that are nothing more than thinly disguised inmercials. Event participants can inadvertently pay good money to subsidize their competitors' efforts to poach their own customers. True disclosure of intent and sponsors would lend real credibility to some of these shows.

Second, presenters need to be "on board." Consultants promoting events sometimes publish impressive programs without the consent of listed participants. The printed program is then used to try to coerce the listed people to show.

Promoters will also try to apply leverage by implying that the other significant invitees have accepted — when they haven't. This tactic usually fails to work after several instances. The result is a program of significantly less stature than the advance program. I would suggest that conference Web sites maintain current updates of program participants.

The presenters should be the same as the advance press promises, and the number and nature of attendees should be disclosed. I recently spoke at an event on the North American Free Trade Agreement where I was told 200 to 300 industry leaders would be present. Once I eliminated the other speakers in the audience, I counted only a handful of local business people. And an event with the same basic topic was slated by another organization six weeks later.

We need to identify good programs, present them, and not repeat them. And when conference numbers are down, organizers should help discern and alleviate the problem.

Just as television networks provide free advertising when programs fail to achieve certain levels of viewership, conference organizers should do the same for sponsors and exhibitors.

The basis for counting attendance needs to be clear. Some conferences refuse to provide participant lists; citing privacy concerns. This should be balanced against reasonable expectations of attendees who wish to follow-up with other participants, yet may not wish to be inundated with unsolicited sales calls.

A code of conduct for industry conferences is probably an unrealistic expectation. The growth of e-commerce and the Internet is giving rise to an explosion of conferences. Many people will learn from harsh experience about gatherings of charlatans, but the ease of information exchange from the Internet should make available better information about upcoming events.

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