



Speaker's Corner

What Is Wrong or Right With Our Conferences?

■ George E. Ponchak

I have become very concerned about some of our conferences, and, by our, I mean all of the conferences microwave engineers may attend today. A very well-respected professor and member of the IEEE Microwave Theory and Techniques Society (MTT-S) recently stated that he and his students may not publish or present their papers at the IEEE MTT-S International Microwave Symposium (IMS) any longer, as the editors are rejecting the subsequent papers submitted to *IEEE Transactions on Microwave Theory and Techniques* because the reviewers claim the papers are not sufficiently expanded. He asked for help and, I guess, our opinion. Of course, we could not help because we are not the editors of the journals. I told him that I fully understood and that I advise students not to present a paper at a conference if they require one more journal paper for graduation. Why risk the acceptance of the



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journal paper? Another distinguished MTT-S member responded that conferences are still relevant because they help authors publicize their work and obtain feedback to help complete their research.

Normally, I would agree with this comment because conferences are mainly held to allow 1) authors to present their work and get feedback from the audience, either through direct comments or thoughtful questions; 2) other researchers to be informed of the latest research and possibly lead them

in new directions; and 3) the community to periodically meet to discuss the state of the science.

The most famous of all conferences are the Solvay conferences, especially those organized in the early 1900s to discuss the main topics of the time: How can classical physics explain the new results being discovered? How should modern physics be developed? These were small conferences of between 20 and 30 of the field's most respected scientists, who discussed and debated the recent results and theories and planned the next steps in the development of physics. In fact, discussions were allocated more time than there were presentations. In the words of Dr. Werner Heisenberg, "The Solvay meetings have stood as an example of how much well-planned and well-organized conferences can contribute to the progress of science."

Unfortunately, today's conferences are not organized in the same way, especially larger conferences such as the IMS. Today, we must stay on schedule, with 15 min for the author to present his or her paper, followed by 5 min for questions. If there are more questions, the session chair will

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tell the audience to see the author in the hallway after the session. Worse yet, often, the audience will not ask any questions or make any comments. When that happens, the session chair will ask a simple question to fill the time until the next speaker's time slot. From the authors' point of view, this is horrible. It means they spent a week of their time and more than US\$1,500 to attend the conference and returned home with no input concerning their research and a feeling that nobody cared about it. There are definitely no debates, in-depth discussions, or planning for the future development of microwave engineering at the conference.

Why does this happen? Is the conference too large to provide a sense of community?

I know one microwave engineer who works for a large U.S. company and is forbidden by the company from asking questions or making comments after a presentation. He was even told not attend sessions within his area of expertise. All of this so that a competitor will not learn what his company is working on or possibly be aided by his participation. Imagine this company believing that microwave engineers throughout the world do not know what it is working on. Newspapers, the Internet, and stock pages inform everyone that the company works on radar and phased-array antennas and the systems that use them.

The lack of industry participation in our technical programs does not help the progress of microwave engineering. This is surely not the attitude of Nikola Tesla, who, at a meeting of esteemed scientists in London said,


Is there, I ask, can there be, a more interesting study than that of alternating current? We observe how this energy takes the many forms of heat, light, mechanical energy, and even chemical affinity. All of these observations fascinate us. Each day we go to our work in the hope that someone, no matter who, may find a solution to one of the pending problems, and each succeeding day we return to our work with renewed ardor.

Note that Tesla's unselfish attitude reflects that of the Solvay conferences attendees. It is too bad that the attendees of today's conferences do not have that same attitude.

I just returned from the IEEE MTT-S International Microwave and RF Conference (IMaRC) in India. It was a very enjoyable conference and the exact opposite of the IMS. The attendees joined one another for breakfast and lunch, attended a banquet, and, essentially, were together for three days. This built a sense of community. At this more interesting and enjoyable conference, audience members asked questions of every author, often not even waiting for the session chair to call for questions;

moreover, the chair did not cut them off, even when the session ran longer than planned. The senior members in the audience made comments to the younger authors to help them to see the problems with their research and understand the next steps; it was almost like students defending their master's or Ph.D. thesis. The authors surely benefited from attending the conference, and the attendees benefited as well. I have found that other small MTT-S conferences, such as the IEEE MTT-S Wireless Power Transfer Conference and the IEEE MTT-S International Conference on Numerical Electromagnetic and Multiphysics Modeling and Optimization, are also very successful and help build communities.

Maybe that professor who is critical of the IMS as well as his students would feel as though they could benefit from participating in these smaller conferences—even from the IMS or European Microwave Conference if the organizers made an effort to develop a sense of community and incorporated time and freedom into the schedule to allow for more questions and discussion. And, possibly, *attendees* of these conferences will start to behave like *participants* in the conference and the microwave community as a whole.

I firmly believe that conferences are important to the development of microwave science. But they must change to be more like the Solvay conferences or IMaRC, and attendees must act like participants. 



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Future

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