Reflections on Organizing and Running a Continuing Education Course

I’m sure you’ve heard the war stories about what it’s like to organize and run a Continuing Education (CE) course at the Annual SOT Meeting: hours of thankless work; tight deadlines; uncooperative speakers; bizarre personality issues; last-minute crises. All, to one degree or another, are true. What never seems to get mentioned, unfortunately, are the rewards associated with organizing these courses. The CE courses are a popular and important part of the annual meeting, and so it is vital that dedicated and knowledgeable individuals continue to volunteer for the job. I would like to offer some inside observations based on a three-year stint on the CE Committee, as a course organizer on one, and as an instructor in two different courses.

The first step is choosing an appropriate topic. One factor to consider when picking a topic is the level of general interest. For example, is this an esoteric topic that only a few people care about or will find relevant to their daily job as a toxicologist? If so, the topic may be more appropriate for the symposium or workshop format. Another factor is what we might call the Amaturity of the subject. That is, are the basic concepts and techniques understood, or is the subject still theoretical? Again, you might want to consider a different venue. Bear in mind, a CE course must present a broad overview of the subject; it is not a forum for the presentation of one’s newest findings. This is a trap many instructors fall into, knowingly or otherwise. Also at this stage you’ll need to carefully decide if this will be a basic or an advanced course. You should also poll your suggested speakers for their interest in actually taking part.

Once you have chosen a couple of potential topics, start talking to people. Your colleagues will be a valuable resource in determining what people want to know about a particular subject. Get suggestions on who the experts are, then find out if those experts are effective communicators. Find out who backup speakers might be. The more information you start with, the better your chances are at a successful course. You’ll also want to get the sponsorship of one or more of the specialty sections related to your topic. This sponsorship lends a degree of credibility to the course. The suggested courses go to the CE Committee. Occasionally, if a similar topic has been presented relatively recently, the applicant is requested to resubmit at a later date. The Committee may also suggest different speakers, or a slight change of focus. Otherwise, if the course is acceptable, you’ll be notified.

So much for the easy part. Once your course has been approved the real challenge begins. Frequent and detailed communications at this point will hopefully prevent misunderstandings later. Your biggest challenge in the entire process lies before you, namely assembling the syllabus, which is the only tangible product. The course syllabi are often purchased by individuals who are unable to attend the course physically, and are more important than you might imagine. However, the deadline for completion is months prior to the Annual Meeting, and resistance to this deadline is legendary. Pleading, threats and swearing occasionally come into play. But, somehow or another, you’ll make the deadline.

Finally, you are at the Annual Meeting, and the moment of truth has arrived. Student volunteers do much of the leg work such as handing out syllabi, directing people to the correct rooms, and turning back gate crashers. Professionals handle the projection and lighting chores. The hardest job you will have at this point will be keeping the speakers on schedule. In almost every case, the months of preparation pay off and the course runs smoothly. Later you’ll get the evaluation forms that are filled out by the attendees; these will provide you with useful feedback. Of course, you’ll also hear from attendees who think you should’ve provided refreshments during the course (I got one of those), or who thought that your (clearly labeled) advanced course was just too…well…advanced.

Is organizing a CE course a lot of work? Absolutely. It can also be, shall we say, challenging. But the benefits far outweigh any problems you’ll have. By working closely with the experts on a subject, you’ll gain a deeper understanding of the topic you have chosen. Often, you’ll develop a reputation of expertise in the area as well. The practical experience you get from managing a successful CE course just might encourage you to organize other meetings. But most of all, the feeling of accomplishment you get when someone comes up to you a year later, and tells you how much they learned from your course, is priceless.

Robert V. House
Covance Laboratories, Inc.