



George S. Sokulski
Associate Publisher

The real story of C&S in KC

By now, you've probably read or heard a lot about the RSSI exhibit in Kansas City, May 16-17. Measured by just about any standard, the gathering was a success: attendance, contacts, sales, marketing, improved knowledge and so on.

What you probably aren't aware of is how this all came about. It wasn't rocket science.

All the signs were there that a change was necessary. It merely took one outspoken individual with insight, Dave Fox, Railway Equipment Co., to start the ball rolling. Dave gives credit to Jim Huntley, ERICO Inc., as well. The RSSI Board agreed and the idea began to become reality.

Dave is quick to point out the real heroes of the success are Dennis Boll, BNSF, and Phil Abaray, UP. These guys stuck their necks out because this sounded like a good idea. They weren't simply figureheads, but took on an active role in defining the shape and scope of the meeting.

One railroader said that the morale of his people increased immensely. There was a feeling that the company really cared about them. The guys really got excited. They were able to meet their peers. Everybody talked to everyone else. The new format enabled the railroads to bring more people.

One railroad had one group of people in attendance on the first day and a different group on the second. Another senior railroader said that he didn't leave the hotel the entire time and he expected the same from his people.

Everyone knows that to have a successful meeting, you had to have lots of trappings like fancy hotels, attractive cities, hospitality suites, dinners at fancy restaurants, etc. To get the railroad folks to come, you had to put together a college of experts to present technical papers on a broad variety of topics.

But what I learned from the recent RSSI affair is that there's more than one way to stage a successful meeting. And success was written on the smiling faces of those who attended the Kansas City gathering.

What I heard from railroaders after the meeting, both directly and indirectly, is that they felt C&S had

re-established its importance. That's no small matter.

What I think was the biggest single factor in the success of this exhibition was the involvement of the railroads from the get-go. Union Pacific and Burlington Northern and Santa Fe signed on to endorse the event.

Every railroad is faced with tight budgets today. If RSSI wanted people to come to the exhibition, it had to be inexpensive.

RSSI worked to set things up as inexpensively as possible. This was a major factor. Not only was there no registration fee, but all meals were supplied. In fact, outside of the Tuesday evening welcome dinner that featured Mike Haverty, president and ceo of Kansas City Southern Railway, all meals were served inside the exhibit hall.

All the railroads had to pick up were travel and lodging costs. With a host of railroaders in the area, or just up the road in Omaha, these costs could be kept to a minimum. That encouraged railroads to send people from all levels, something that delighted the suppliers manning the booths. Suppliers got to talk with the people who actually work with their products, not just the top officers. The kind of information exchanged was invaluable to both suppliers and railroaders, and neighboring railroads, as well.

Outside of the exhibits and the welcome dinner, RSSI scheduled nothing else. There were no papers, no hospitality suites. RSSI even asked its member companies not to take customers out to dinner or an afternoon of golf so they could focus on the exhibits.

The exhibit hall was open 11 hours both Wednesday and Thursday. That gave everyone a chance to spend time talking about the products and services available. I did hear some grumbling about the long days. In my opinion, that's our job as exhibitors to staff our booths for the entire session. I understand that RSSI's Board and staff are massaging schedule changes before the next gathering in Louisville, Ky., next May.

My "Congrats" to those who helped come up with the new format and to make it a success. It takes courage to try something new.