

RSSI scores a double

From the banks of the Missouri to the Falls of the Ohio, RSSI completed its second successful trade show, building on a new process first tested last year. The May gathering in Louisville, Ky., showed that last year's exhibit was no one-shot wonder.

As most of you remember, in 2001, RSSI held its exhibition in Kansas City with several new wrinkles. After working hand-in-glove with top railroad signal officers, RSSI tried to put together a gathering tailored to the railroaders' needs. For one thing, there was no registration fee. For another, all meals, which were mostly served right in the exhibit hall, were free. To get people there, railroads only had to pony up the cost of travel and possibly lodging. Some folks came for just one day, walking out on the exhibit floor in the morning and heading for home with their brains buzzing with new ideas and new technology at the end of the day.

And the exhibit floor was pretty much all there was. There were no papers presented, no hospitality suites and no golf tournaments. Exhibitors were asked not to invite railroaders out for dinner or a day on the golf links during the exhibit in order to avoid distractions.

About the only extracurricular activities going on were safety and staff meetings.

Since so many railroaders were in one place at one time, management took advantage of that fact to stage these meetings.

Once again the formula worked. The turnout included railroaders from the man in the field to the top signal officer. Virtually all railroads were represented, although CSXT and Norfolk Southern outnumbered the rest. But that was to be expected, just as BNSF and UP employees made up the majority last year.

The ratio of vendors attending to railroaders attending was almost one-to-one. That's amazing. At most trade shows, exhibitors are delighted if the ratio is as low as two-to-one.

Suppliers were happy, for the most part. Railroaders were happy. And the RSSI Board is looking at the whole

process to try to improve it before the next gathering in July 2003 at Chicago's Navy Pier.

I think this success is attributable to a simple method: Find out what the customers want and give it to them.

The set-up RSSI used might or might not work for AREMA or APTA or ASLRRA. Those organizations all run excellent meetings and I certainly don't mean to denigrate them one bit by praising RSSI. I firmly believe exhibits and technical conferences are a vital part of this industry. But it certainly doesn't hurt for all the associations to see what pays off for another group.

I talked with many other exhibitors and got some similar and some differing reactions. Virtually everyone I talked to had a positive overall view of the gathering. They liked that ratio of one supplier to one railroader a lot. And they liked the opportunity to talk with c&s guys at all levels. The top people were there, taking and giving their time to learn the latest at each booth.

And the people who spend their days in the field actually using the vendors' products were there as well. These folks appreciate the latest bells and whistles because they can see how the new features can make things a little more efficient or easier to maintain. These are the hands-on employees who use the items day-in and day-out.

Some vendors said the crowds were kind of thin on the last day, while others told me they felt the number of people in the hall was fine the entire time. Some of those attending suggested that the exhibit end about 4 p.m. on the last day, with perhaps a reception once the exhibitors begin to pack up.

Railroaders seemed to be happy with the gathering as well. The fact that the entire focus was on c&s certainly didn't hurt. In terms of sheer numbers, c&s people tend to get overwhelmed at railroad gatherings, so it helps to have an event that's exclusively for them.

As I mentioned, the RSSI Board will be spending a lot of time looking over this year's event with an eye to improving things for next year. If you have suggestions, be sure to forward them to RSSI headquarters in Louisville.



George S. Sokulski
Associate Publisher