

THE ACADEMY OF ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING

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Conventions - Where Do We Go From Here?

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National conventions of trade groups such as NECA and of service, fraternal, political, and professional organizations have become larger, more spectacular, more difficult to stage, and more costly in recent years. All of which brings up the question: Are conventions going to become larger, smaller, or are not even going to be held in the years ahead?

In any forecast of the future of conventions, I believe that we first must look to the earlier days of conventions - back to the period just after World War I.

Those were different times - days before network radio and television linked all corners of the land. And those were less complicated days, too, from a technical standpoint. Our electrical industry, for example, then was not moving at today's breakneck pace just to keep up with the developments of science and technology.

Certainly, there were conventions in those days where the emphasis was on the application of scientific breakthroughs to the practical use of such professionals as physicians and scientists.

But, by and large, conventions in those post World War I years were fun-type get togethers -- meetings designed to give members a chance to let off steam, enjoy the companionship of old friends, elect a new slate of officers for the coming year, and win a bit of national publicity for the organization.

Sure, you remember the type of convention I'm referring to -- the ones where convention hi-jinks were remembered long after convention achievements were forgotten.

As you'll recall, convention activity came to a screeching halt with the stockmarket crash of 1929. In the depression that followed that crash, money was scarce and few people had either the heart or cash to let them participate in anything resembling the razzle-dazzle conventions of the mid-'20s.

Conventions during the World War II years, of course, were limited to all but "care-taker" status because of travel and manpower restrictions.

The picture changed sharply after the end of that war and we began to see the start of the modern conventions we know today.

You'll remember those post-World War II years -- a period still plagued by material shortages, years when any 10 economists had 10 different forecasts about the direction in which the economy could swing.

Indeed, the immediate post-war years were confusing ones as the nation moved from a wartime to a peacetime economy. And that was when the technological revolution really began to sweep the land. New products, new services, new ways of doing old jobs appeared with startling regularity, and business and professional men were hard pressed to keep up with the flow of information.

Gone forever were the days before the war, when -- as in our electrical industry, for example -- a man could move from apprentice to company owner without really ever having to worry about new materials, new production methods, new ways of working with labor and government.

That post-war period marked the start of the "information explosion" that continues to this day. Although trade magazines and "how to" books multiplied at an amazing rate, electrical contractors still were seeking more and more information about the ever-growing number of changes in their industry and in the business world around them.

The conventions of NECA -- and of the majority of other trade groups in the nation -- began, in those immediate post-war years, to more closely reflect their members' needs and interests than conventions ever had done before. Conventions had "grown up" and had become a vital part of the nation's business-industrial picture.

It was no longer enough for a speaker to address a convention session in a series of resounding platitudes. Members wanted stimulating, inspirational talks, to be sure, but, above all, they wanted "nuts and bolts" discussions of their practical problems.

Today, of course, most conventions have "name" speakers as star attractions; however, equally important stars today are the panels of specialists who lead the workshop sessions.

I believe that this growing emphasis on convention workshops is the principal change in convention activity during the last 20 or 25 years.

The results of this change have been twofold: First, greater convention attendance because of the true value of modern conventions; and, second, because conventions have shed their old "fun and games" aura, costs of attending those conventions are more easily supported as valid -- and deductible -- business expenses.

In talking about the matter of deductible convention expenses let's not kid ourselves. Were today's business and professional men not able to deduct their convention expenses as part of their cost of doing business, I'm sure that convention attendance -- in spite of the value of those meetings -- would drop more sharply than it did after the stock market crash of 1929.

I see nothing on the horizon to indicate that the IRS is going to take a different view of convention expenses in the future. As long as conventions remain truly worthwhile for those who attend, as long as conventions enable business and professional men to broaden their knowledge, conventions will continue to be an important part of the American business scene.

But what about the conventions of the future? What can we expect to see in our conventions 10 years or so from today?

Let's go back into convention history again and look at the period just after the Korean War, when we saw, for the first time, an awakening interest in the so-called "post-convention tours."

Today, of course, these "tours" or "seminars" constitute an important part of the conventions of many organizations and, I'm confident, they'll become an even more important part of conventions in the years ahead.

Can such "post-convention tours" be considered a valid and deductible part of a person's convention expenses? I believe they can. In the first place, there generally are a number of really worthwhile reasons for such tours -- to examine (as in the case of our industry) technically-oriented features of interest and value to progressive electrical contractors.

Another equally important benefit of these tours is that they give convention delegates the opportunity to spend time building friendships and exchanging ideas with their contemporaries from throughout the United States.

Frankly, I think most trade associations have been a little backward in planning post-convention tours. I foresee a big change in the years just ahead and I'm sure that before too long we'll see post convention tours taking large groups of delegates to such rapidly developing nations as Japanand, perhaps, eventually, even behind the Iron and Bamboo Curtains.

And, of course, this tour or seminar idea is a two-way street. I know that many of us in the electrical industry have benefited from our tours of Japan and I'm equally confident that those of us who have hosted Japanese electrical contractors who have visited the United States have benefited from that interchange, too.

Time was when the big attraction at a convention was the roster of convention speakers -- "big names" from the worlds of government, business, and entertainment. I'm convinced that in the years to come equally important convention attractions will be the post-convention tours.

Stop and think about your own particular situation as a businessman and I think you'll agree with me. Isn't it true that, more often than not, you combine your major convention trip of the year with your vacation?

I don't think this pattern is going to change and I foresee the day when a man will base his decision on attending a convention (at least in part) upon the announced post-convention tours.

What about the size of trade association conventions in the years ahead?

Before we discuss that we should establish some reference points about convention size.

First of all, there are two types of conventions -- the national ones that bring delegates from throughout the nation; and the regional or district conventions that attract delegates from within arbitrarily established geographical subdivisions.

Naturally, the larger conventions are the national ones and these fall roughly into three categories: the major conventions, with attendance ranging from 7,000 or 8,000 up to 15,000; and the smaller conventions with attendance upwards to the 7,000-8,000 mark. Regional conventions also fall into three size categories, with the large, medium and small ones commanding attendance roughly one-fifth or one-quarter that of their national counterparts.

National and regional trade association conventions -- and I believe those of NECA are typical -- fall into the "smaller convention" group. And, by and large, the greater number of conventions held each year in the United States fall into this category.

So, what about convention size in the years ahead? I don't foresee any dramatic growth in the large and medium-size major national conventions for the simple reason that not too many cities in the United States can accommodate these events that might attract as many as 35,000 or 40,000 visitors including delegates and their wives.

I do, however, foresee real growth for trade association conventions... the group that now attracts upwards to 5,000 or 7,000 to national sessions, and 1,000 or 2,000 to regional meetings.

What would be the reasons for this growth? Facilities, for one thing, will play an important role in contributing to the growth of these conventions.

NECA can be proud in that it provides a wider span of interest to more convention goers than most conventions. One of the real big assets is the exposition. The exposition allows those who are interested in new tools, equipment and materials to touch, see and hear about them. The exposition puts the suppliers and manufacturers' top people eye ball to eye ball with the contractors from all over the land. As well as the contractors having a chance to meet the people who are responsible for their sources of supply. The exposition becomes a laboratory for the manufacturers because he becomes aware of the field problems of the products from those who really know. The exposition gives the individual contractor an incentive to take home a substantial prize.

More and more cities throughout the nation have discovered that convention business is profitable and they have set about developing first class convention facilities. And these aren't just the "resort"-type communities, such as Atlantic City and Miami. Today we see scores of smaller cities with splendid convention facilities completed or in the planning stage.

These facilities, plus such factors as climate, atmosphere, environment, and the hospitality of its citizens, will serve to draw NECA-size conventions to these new convention areas.

Let's face it: Even though conventions are far more serious, more dedicated to business than they were in the 1920s, delegates are going to attend conventions that are held in localities that have the most to offer from a "vacation" and tourist standpoint.

The extent to which a convention city and its facilities are attractive can have a lot to do with convention size. A good case in point is San Diego. Because that city has excellent convention facilities, ideal climate, scores of visitor attractions, and hospitable citizens, more delegates will show up for a San Diego convention than might appear if an organization were holding its meeting in a less attractive location.

So, it's safe to assume that with the growing number of communities offering excellent convention facilities and visitor attractions we'll see continued growth of the small and medium-size conventions.

And still another factor will contribute to the growth of conventions in the years ahead. I referred to this earlier -- the post-convention tours or seminars.

These are improving constantly, participation is increasing and all this is being reflected in convention attendance.

NECA has done an excellent job in both district and national convention planning and there's no question but what the NECA conventions will continue to grow in size.

A very large percentage of NECA members attend both the national convention and their individual district conventions each year. The reasons for this are obvious...attractive convention locations, interesting programs, good post-convention seminars; plus opportunities to view electrical industry problems, trends, and developments on both a national and regional basis.

The format for some types of conventions has been firmly set and I'm sure that in these -- the national political conventions, for instance, where widespread public exposure is vital -- aren't going to change.

But what about the format for smaller conventions -- those of trade associations, for example? I see major changes in the years ahead and, I venture to say, many of these changes will come within the next decade.

What types of changes? Principally, I foresee the growth of district or regional conventions -- conventions held by the various regions, districts, or other sub-divisions of national associations.

There are many benefits that regional conventions hold for all of us. First, of course, is the matter of size. The smaller a convention, the more likely it is to be able to find accommodations in a smaller, more attractive, resort-type community.

Second, smaller conventions mean smaller, more effective workshops and seminars.

There's still another important benefit to be found in regional conventions. This is the matter of a firm being able to afford to send not just its top executives, but also a number of second echelon people to these meetings.

Then, too, in spite of ever-improving communications throughout the nation, business oftentimes has highly individual regional differences. Regional conventions offer opportunities for more extensive examination of localized problems.

What about other changes in our conventions? If not directly, then at least indirectly, video-tape recording eventually will have some effect upon the structure of district and national conventions, as well as upon any workshops held in conjunction with those meetings.

Because video tape recording offers an opportunity to bring convention-generated information to the "troops" within each company, I foresee the day in the not too distant future when video tape records of convention workshop sessions will be available on a library-like basis for interested firms to use.

Frankly, I feel that over the years those of us who regularly attend trade association conventions have done a rather poor job in bringing back from those conventions information that will be of benefit in all levels of our individual firms.

I think this is due, in part, to the number of convention activities going on at the same time. Simply because you only can be in one place at one time, you're forced to pass up some of the workshop sessions that would be of real interest and value to you.

The result is that you come home from a convention after having participated in only part of the workshops and other activities. Your "convention report" to your key people then only reflects the portions of the convention in which you, personally, were interested.

Video-taping parts of general convention sessions, workshops, and seminars would enable you to give your people the real "meat" of the conventions you attend.

I feel pretty strongly about the matter of bringing information back from conventions for use in our own firms. This might not be the most diplomatic thing to say, but I feel that -- and this applies to all industries -- convention

reports in trade magazines all too often are dull, generally speaking. I feel that NECA convention reports are a cut above the average.

Maybe trade associations should hire the people from "Reader's Digest" to attend their conventions, then summarize convention talks in a brief -- very brief -- and interesting manner.

All too often, I believe, some convention addresses are reported in full in industry magazines as ego-builders for the speakers involved. I suppose there can be good reasons for this, but, speaking personally, I'd much rather read a concise, 400 or 500 word summary of an address than wade through a word-by-word transcript of a half-hour talk however interesting it might be. I feel that the same summarizing could be done on the presentations made in workshop sessions, as well as for the reports of standing and special committees.

If, as I forecast, there will be an increase in the number of regional conventions and, hopefully, an improvement in reporting convention activities, it follows that there will be benefits that will come from the interchange of brief, well-written convention reports between the various regions of a trade association.

What about the "stars" of today's conventions - those business, governmental, and religious leaders - whose names often are used as attendance-builders?

I'll be the first to admit that I'm still country-boy enough to get a big kick out of seeing a real celebrity in person as he addresses a convention. However, I'm not country-boy enough to be particularly impressed when the celebrity's connection with the industry presenting the convention is more

than just a little bit remote. You know the sort of convention speech I mean... the type where mention of the industry involved is dragged in by the heels. That's when we hear our keynote speakers give such exciting, definitive talks as "A major league third baseman looks at tract wiring," or "A Minister's reflections on the use of flexible conduit." Happily, I think we're getting away from this.

To summarize: The growing complexity of business in general and of electrical technology in particular, plus electrical contractors' need for continuing in-put of information is proof of the need for conventions. These factors, plus the opportunity to combine convention travel with something akin to "vacation" travel, are certain to assure the continued growth of trade association conventions in the years ahead.

Post-convention tours or seminars are sure to contribute to convention attendance and, through improved planning, these are going to become even more valuable and productive than they have been in the past.

And, it seems only logical to assume, the format or structure of conventions will be tailored so they'll be of direct benefit to far more people than to just the key men who actually attend. This, of course, will come through the medium of improved convention reporting.

It adds up to this: Business, industrial, and professional conventions are a vital part of American life. They will continue in this capacity only if convention planners concentrate upon making conventions relevant to the actual needs of the businesses, industries, and professions they serve.