Gill Library Publications   Gill Library

6-1999

Behind the Scenes at an IUG Meeting

Terry Ballard
Gill Library, College of New Rochelle, tballard@cnr.edu

Recommended Citation

Ballard, T. (1999). Behind the Scenes at an IUG Meeting. *Information Today*, 16, 60-61.

The Systems Librarian

by Terry Ballard

Behind the Scenes at an IUG Meeting

Lots of hard work goes into the planning of these annual conferences

The call came out of the blue 2 years ago: Would I be willing to have my name on the ballot for the Innovative Users Group board of directors? I felt complimented to be invited, so I allowed them to put my name up. I assumed that I wouldn't be elected since I was too late to have any information about myself printed on the ballot. No such luck—lots of those people had bought my book about Innovative Interfaces [*Innopac: A Reference Guide to the System*, Information Today, Inc., 1995], so they knew my name. By accepting this offer I would learn, among other things, 1) what happens when 1,000 systems librarians get together in the same place; 2) what the inner workings of the delicate relationship are like between an OPAC vendor and a dedicated group of its customers; and 3) what the best place for Chinese food in Oakland, California, was.

Since my election was to the post of board member at large, they were faced with the task of finding me something to do. Diana Davis, who was chair at the time, must have looked at the resume on my Web page and discovered that my first master's degree was in audiovisual education. She suggested that I coordinate the audiovisual needs at the annual conference, which was to be held in Nashville in April 1998. That seemed like a good idea—I had been to countless conferences, but had never seen one put together from the inside.

Welcome to Music City

After weeks of compiling equipment requests from speakers, I was flown to Nashville a month before the conference to see the facility and meet with the equipment providers. "We'll take care of you," they assured me, as they handed me the price sheet for rentals. I was stunned at the cost of video projectors—upwards of $500 per day. We settled on renting two of them and proceeded to borrow LCD panels from attendees.

On that visit, I made the innocent remark that I'd always wanted to see a tornado. A week before the conference, those words came back to haunt me when tornadoes ripped through downtown Nashville, leaving parts of our conference hotel severely damaged.

> **"**
> *Since my election was to the post of board member at large, they were faced with the task of finding me something to do.*
> **"**

We arrived in Nashville the day before the conference to make the final preparations. Several of the committee members visited the Nashville Public Library to pick up some boxes. As we walked through the front door, we noticed that one of the dumb terminals in their OPAC row had a blank screen. Several of us ran over to give it some quick troubleshooting. By opening day, I was working with a committee of three.

At the beginning of each session there were 10 rooms to cover, so we were each assigned several sessions. In spite of the fact that we only had 15 minutes between sessions, and in spite of the fact that we were all doing this for the first time, everything ran like clockwork. Our biggest problem was the occasional presenter who insisted on making a live connection to the Internet. Even so, not a single program was delayed because of equipment problems. Dozens of people ran up to us and complimented us on how well the AV went. Then we read the conference evaluations and found out what they really thought. It seems that we forgot to put floor mikes in the larger meeting rooms. The truth is, we just didn't think of it. Also, people complained about the LCD panels that worked with laptops and overhead projectors—they wanted the image quality of real data projectors.

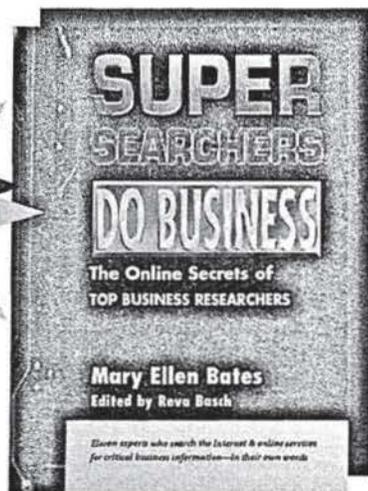While we were happy with the audiovisuals, not everything worked as well. The

company that had contracted to bus hundreds of librarians to a concert simply forgot to pick them up, leaving us to marvel at the patience of systems librarians as they calmly set up consortia and hailed cabs.

Oakland: The City that Traded Mark McGwire

One year later, the annual Innovative Users Group Meeting was to be held April 24-27 in Oakland, California, following a normal rotation that placed it near Innovative Interfaces' headquarters every other year. I volunteered to run the AV one more time so I could learn from last year's mistakes and get everything right. We built some continuity in the process by giving on-the-job training to next year's AV coordinator, Gary Harris. This time, the first thing we thought of was floor mikes. We also discouraged speakers from making live connections to the Internet. In the past year; a number of good software programs appeared that allow you to make very realistic images of Web screens; at Quinnipiac, we have been using one called Hijaak95. Finally, we decided to rent enough video projectors to cover all sessions. We knew this extra cost was in the works, so we raised the convention rates to cover better equipment. The registration fee was still under $100 per person; the organization is aware that some people have to cover the fee on their own, so we try to make the fees realistic.

In Nashville, enough speakers used overhead projectors that we installed them in every room. In Oakland, nearly everybody was running PowerPoint programs, so we had to rent four projectors. Last year, we found out that not all laptops are compatible with all projectors. This year, we armed ourselves with walkie-talkies, so when problems appeared, we could get the other committee members to converge on the trouble-spot. It was a great comfort to have

> " *Dozens of people ran up to us and complimented us on how well the AV went. Then we read the conference evaluations and found out what they really thought.* "

committee members such as Peter Murray from Case Western University and Karen Perone from the Rodman Public Library in Ohio. When people like these get into a brainstorming session, things always work.

We only went a little over budget, thanks to the people from Innovative Interfaces who supplied five projectors. The relation-

ship between Innovative Interfaces and its users group is a delicate one. The company meets with the committee at every ALA meeting and at every conference planning session. It is like a good marriage, where issues are being tested all the time. They know that such a users group is very advantageous to them. On the other hand, the group could not run its conference without the assistance and blessing of the company. Inevitably, things will come up to displease one side or the other, and these are settled swiftly. There is too much important work involved to risk any long-term negative baggage. The connection between user group and company was particularly confusing for the convention center staff: Were we an educational group, a

prosperous library automation company—or both?

When the 1,000 librarians arrived, there was one overriding question: Where do we eat? A group this size can swamp a city's downtown eateries. Fortunately, I spent some time during the planning trip exploring Chinatown, which borders the convention center. Almost every day I led hungry librarians to the Best Taste Restaurant on Franklin Street—a place that is generally absent from guidebooks. It is one of those authentic restaurants with ducks and chickens hanging in the window. They brought us giant plates of roast pork and duck that averaged only $3.50 per person.

Once again the hard work paid off—the speakers' needs were usually covered with
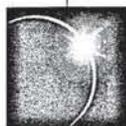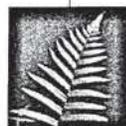
time to spare. The downside was that those of us on the committee were so drained that we missed a lot of the programs.

Next time you go to a conference and things go smoothly, you can be sure that people were behind the scenes working very hard. Please be more appreciative than the person who wrote in a conference evaluation that some of us on the committee think of ourselves as "gods." We are happy to just be humans who try very hard.

Terry Ballard is the automation librarian at Quinnipiac College in Hamden, Connecticut. He can be reached at ballard@quinnipiac.edu, or through his Web page at http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/3632.