IEEE *t*alks to MCI

IEEE

Interview from Susan Root
Director Conference Business Services
IEEE, Advancing Technology for Humanity

MCI was recently engaged by IEEE to conduct a global trends analysis and market research to identify new opportunities and future models for IEEE's conference business. MCI talks to Susan Root about the key findings.

MCI: Can you outline the success of IEEE's conference model?

Susan Root: IEEE conferences create value for members, volunteers and for the engineering technical community around the world. Conferences provide the opportunity for members, volunteers and attendees to learn, to meet and network with colleagues and to present and publish research in their areas of interest. Our conferences are volunteer run and are known for being highquality events. Several factors play into that perception including high quality technical programmes, the ability of the conference to attract papers of interest in the technical field and for the conference to effectively attract attendees. For our members, running conferences also provides the opportunity for professional development. Conferences are truly projects that are planned over a 2-4 year period and managing the event requires not only technical skill but real project management and leadership skills.

MCI: Since the IEEE conference business unit is so critical for delivering value to members and customers around the world: Why did your management team determine the need to conduct a conference business analysis? What was the business case?

SR: The number of conferences IEEE sponsors has been growing steadily over the past decade. In addition the demographics of both sponsors and conference locations has been growing organically and moving from a US-centric to a truly global model. Gaining an understanding of the underlying causes for the growth and change and how to use this information to help shape IEEE's conference future is what led us to conduct the business analysis. The information derived from the analysis is supporting our efforts to identify high priority areas of focus. The business cases will be a next step in our planning process. Like other companies, we have a myriad of stakeholder groups including IEEE governance groups such as IEEE Conferences Committee, internal management groups and the congress organiser. We needed insight into the global market to understand what has changed and is changing in the global community as a backdrop for our strategic work. We also needed input directly from our conference organisers

and, from attendees of technical conferences (whether these are IEEE conferences or not.) This analysis enabled us to better understand our organisers and identify ways in which to serve them better. As an outcome of the work, we are better able to paint a clear picture of IEEE's value proposition as seen from the customer point of view. Our focus was to be able to understand how to serve our customers better in our existing models and certainly to identify other, new market opportunities.

MCI: What approach did this analysis take?

SR: After gathering all the data from the market scan and the organiser and attendee surveys we used a rigorous process of validating the results against earlier work, categorising findings into our strategic framework and doing some weighted assessments in order to identify areas of high impact focus. We also identified some of our strengths and weaknesses which helped us identify where we needed to focus energy in the future.

MCI: What were some of the most important key findings?

SR: One of the most important things we continue to find is that we have an incredibly dedicated, responsive and engaged volunteer organiser community. They like to give us feedback!
In terms of overall findings, the market scan provided us a view of Megatrends such as the rise of new economies, China, India and Brazil; technology diffusion and 24 x 7 access which provide instant access to information independent of location; fluctuation in age demographics. The message is clear: the world is changing and we need to be connected to the change to sustain and grow our vibrant business. A key learning from the survey was that organiser need to vary by size of conference:
- Small conferences are like small businesses, run by a group of committed volunteers
- Medium conferences are the largest segment in terms of volume
- Large conferences are the most complex events, with substantially more volunteers engaged

Understanding these segments and their specific needs means we can develop ways to serve them in the way they want to be served. Our attendee survey informed us that while both researchers and practitioners attend technical conferences, they attend for entirely different reasons.

MCI: Were there any implications for your conference business that this analysis helped you to discover?

SR: I think this body of work has clearly demonstrated to us we need to be continually looking for ways to keep our existing business fresh and to be actively looking for new ways to serve this conference community. Some questions we might explore in the future are: 'Are there new models on the horizon?', 'Are there new types of partnerships we hadn't considered before?' and 'Is there a natural evolution or life-cycle of a conference?'

MCI: How are you using the analysis to help move opportunities forward/take next steps?

SR: We have already begun to address some of the high-impact, focus areas through socialisation, planning and business case development. Some of the larger strategic issues we are just beginning to socialise for internal feedback and assessment.

MCI: Any suggestions to your association colleagues who might want to build or expand their conference business outside the US market?

SR: Unless your association is explicitly tied to the US market, I think to stay relevant one has to consider what a global footprint would look like. Opening new dialogues with like organizations might be a way to start the journey. We are a global organization with a global membership base so we are logically following the needs of the membership and their fields of interest.

Building Community