

Audiovisual organization for conferences*

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Abstract

Factors related to conference size, complexity, location and communication between the conference organization, contributors and support staff are identified and discussed.

An audiovisual organization is described of which the main features are; the appointment of an audiovisual specialist to coordinate the organization, preview and controlled delivery of audiovisual material to support staff, and the use of an events chart as an aid to forecasting and identifying problems.

Introduction

The audiovisual aspects of conference organization are seldom accorded the importance they deserve and only rarely does a conference committee include an audiovisual specialist. We have all sat through the embarrassing hiatus when the sound does not work or the picture does not appear, or the image is too large, too small, out of focus or upside down. These errors are often the outward manifestation of an inner confusion as behind the scenes an inadequate organization struggles to cope with demands for facilities, the need for which has not been foreseen.

However, it is significant that while incidents like these do happen, they are seldom the fault of the support staff, i.e., the projectionists, sound recordists and television engineers. In most cases the blame can be placed squarely upon a lack of experience, communication and foresight on the part of the conference organizers. Over many years the writer has observed and experienced the delights and the disasters of numerous conferences as projectionist, delegate, contributor and organizer. He has made all the mistakes—many of them more than once—and the audiovisual organization which will be described has evolved out of an analysis of these mistakes.

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It is the view of the writer that the most vulnerable areas of conference organization lie in:

1. Communication between contributors and the conference organization.
2. Communication between the conference organization and the host institution.
3. The handling of audiovisual materials.

The audiovisual coordinator

The cornerstone of the suggested organization is the appointment to the conference committee of an individual who is given complete responsibility for coordinating the audiovisual arrangements. For convenience this individual will be referred to hereafter as the audiovisual coordinator (AVC).

The AVC should be chosen carefully. It is vital that he exhibits a high degree of competence in the operation and conditions of use of the range of audiovisual equipment which is likely to be encountered in any conference situation. Additionally, the coordinator must possess considerable organizational ability and the capacity to control staff. In short he must be an able communicator in every sense of the word.

Preparation

No two conference situations are alike, therefore it is not possible to lay down a precise sequence of events; indeed the provision of audiovisual facilities remains an open-ended situation for the duration of a conference. One of the AVC's first tasks is to correspond with contributors. As papers are accepted he will write to the contributor, identifying himself as the individual responsible for all audiovisual matters. He will explain the audiovisual arrangements, state the facilities which will be provided and suggest that other facilities can be made available by arrangement. He will enclose a response sheet on which the contributor can list his audiovisual requirements. The result of this initial contact is that some time in advance

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of the conference the AVC will know who the speakers are, he will have an indication of the use that is likely to be made of the facilities that are offered and he will also have some idea of any additional requirements.

It is unlikely that he will receive a 100 per cent response. Some speakers are incredibly casual about their presentation and will ignore all letters. Others will respond, then change their minds—usually in favour of a more sophisticated presentation—without notifying the AVC.

At some time, well in advance of the conference, the AVC and other members of the committee will visit the conference location. The primary purpose of this visit is to meet the staff of the host institution and inspect the reception, exhibition and social areas and the lecture theatres and seminar rooms. The coordinator will take this opportunity to meet the person in the host organization who is concerned with the provision of audiovisual facilities and support staff. At this early stage in the conference planning the AVC will ensure that the facilities which are listed on the response sheet, to be sent to contributors, can be provided. He will also discuss the provision of additional facilities which may be requested by contributors. It will be necessary for the AVC to maintain the contact thus established with the host institution, and he may return to the conference location for further discussions.

Assessing the requirements

It is useful to identify and consider briefly those factors existing in a proposed conference situation which will dictate the scope of the audiovisual organization required and most influence the demands made upon it.

The first factor to be examined is *conference size*, i.e. the number of delegates expected. If the conference is to take place solely in plenary session, the AVC will be concerned that the lecture theatre is satisfactory in terms of seating capacity, public address system, projection arrangements, lighting and ventilation. A multi-lingual conference may involve the AVC in the provision of suitable facilities for interpreters.

The *duration of the conference* is not a major factor although a lengthy meeting, which includes concurrent sessions, may impose considerable and continuing strain upon the audiovisual staff. Account must be taken of this when

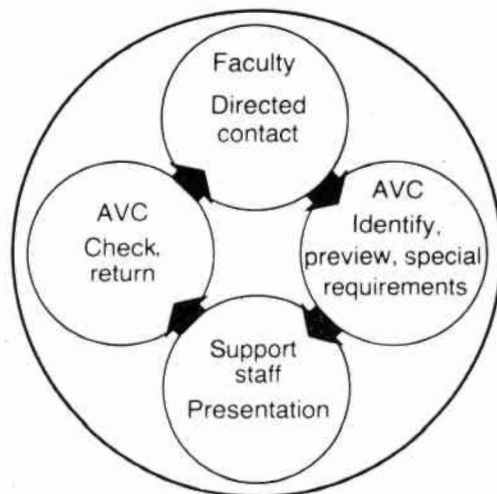
estimating the number of support staff required.

The *number of contributors* is of great importance; the larger the faculty the greater will be the volume of audiovisual material to be identified, checked, presented and returned. Moreover a large faculty will probably require a wide variety of audiovisual facilities.

Concurrent sessions are a major factor in audiovisual organization, not least because conferences which include these sessions tend also to have a large number of contributors. Complex organizational problems occur when several events, each requiring audiovisual facilities, are presented simultaneously—sometimes in widely separated areas. It is necessary to channel the correct material and equipment to the right room at the proper time. While the variety of audiovisual equipment used during concurrent sessions may not be wide, the number of units in operation will be much increased over those required for plenary sessions and additional support staff must be made available.

The final factor to be considered is the *location of the conference*. If it is to take place on the AVC's home ground then, irrespective of other factors, the problems are much simplified. The AVC will be familiar with the lecture theatres and seminar rooms to be used. He will know what equipment is available in the area and whether it may be borrowed or must be hired. The AVC will be acquainted with the audiovisual staff who may be colleagues or friends and, hopefully, this will guarantee their co-

Fig. 1. Schematic diagram of flow of audiovisual material.



operation. The problems inherent in providing an efficient audiovisual organization are greatly increased by distance. In the case of a distant conference location the advisability of early reconnaissance and contact with responsible individuals in the host institution cannot be overstated. If the conference is to take place in a country where English is not the first language, the problems already outlined are complicated by difficulties of communication in a foreign language and by unfamiliar customs and attitudes.

Setting up

The AVC will spend the immediate pre-conference period at the venue. The length of this period is governed by the location and complexity of the conference. The AVC will supervise the setting up of the audiovisual facilities and prepare his own organization, the outline of which is shown diagrammatically in Figure 1. Contact between the AVC and the faculty will be made and maintained by initial and subsequent correspondence as already described and by providing an area in the conference reception where the contributors can be intercepted by a member of the conference secretariat acting as audiovisual receptionist or by the AVC. The contributors' requirements are confirmed and checked off against the events chart, which is described later.

Previewing

An appointment is then made for the AVC to preview contributor's material with the contributor present. Previewing is carried out as soon as possible after the contributor arrives and, in any case, not later than one half-day before he is due to speak. It may be necessary to conduct previews immediately for the benefit of late arrivals. The ideal situation for the preview room is in proximity to the conference reception area and the main lecture theatre. However, the layout of the conference venue may not permit this. If a choice must be made, the preview room should be sited close to the latter area to allow previewing at the last moment for contributors who bypass the reception area and proceed directly to the lecture theatre.

The preview room should be equipped with examples of all the audiovisual equipment requested. Cupboard space should be provided

for storage of material which has been previewed or is awaiting preview.

Handling the audiovisual material

Experience has shown that a convenient arrangement for handling the film, slides etc., is to divide a table top into areas, one area corresponding to one conference day. Each area is further divided into four sections, each of these sections being identified with sessions which take place between normal breaks in the programme. The first section corresponds to the period between the start of the day and the morning break, the second section between the end of the morning break and lunch, and so on. Material for presentation is stored in time order in the appropriate section. An identification slip (Fig. 2) accompanies each item and, in addition, a label is affixed to each magazine, box or reel (Fig. 3). Contributors may request a rehearsal of their presentation and the AVC should be prepared to arrange this. Indeed when the contributors' intentions become known it may be the AVC who insists that a rehearsal is necessary.

For plenary sessions the AVC will deliver the previewed and labelled material for the forthcoming session to support staff and, if appropriate, collect material which was presented during the previous session. This arrangement is reversed for concurrent sessions when support staff will collect material from the preview room, returning it when the next batch is collected. The advantages of this system are:

1. Support staff are responsible only for material for the current session, consequently the projection area is kept tidy and there is less risk of confusion.
2. Because the material is supplied in a batch, the senior projectionist can evaluate the work load which is helpful in arranging staff supplementation or relief.
3. Support staff can be confident that they are not required to show material that has not been checked.

One further aspect of the system is that the AVC acts as a buffer between a demanding faculty and busy staff who are now free to work without interruption. At the same time the faculty are accommodated by the provision of free access to audiovisual facilities for preview and rehearsal.

chairman and checking the room in advance. This is done from a check list supplied by the AVC which includes such details as blackboard, chalk, eraser, water, glasses, seating, lights, ventilation and audiovisual facilities. On the other hand he may be required to act as projectionist, recordist or microphone handler or to assist at the audiovisual reception desk. The use of session executives provides essential back-up to the organization. They are regarded as a form of insurance which an audiovisual coordinator dispenses with at his peril.

The second group of columns indicates the material to be presented. Some of this information can be listed in advance from the response sheets:

Slides—the columns may be divided to show format or multiprojector presentations.

Film—subdivisions may be used to indicate gauge and mute/sound.

Other—depending upon the variety of material to be shown additional headings may be added for overhead projection, microprojection, epidiascope, video.

The final group of columns relates to material handling:

Received

Previewed—time and date of appointment for preview is listed under this heading.

To support staff

From support staff

Checked

Returned

If the layout of conference facilities requires that the preview room be separated from the audiovisual reception desk, the chart is posted in the preview room which is close to the main lecture theatre and is the area in which the AVC will spend much of his time. In this instance the receptionist will accept material and check it off against a list prepared from the response sheets. It is essential that the receptionist and the AVC maintain close liaison, and it is useful if a telephone or intercom link is set up between the preview room and the reception area.

The chart is easily maintained and provides an ongoing picture of conference activities as they affect the audiovisual organization. The AVC is able to identify in advance problems related to facilities, space or staff. For example, empty spaces under 'Received' or 'Previewed'

indicate gaps in information which may demand priority of action.

It must be remembered that the audiovisual organization is only one part of the conference and is subject to constraints which are beyond the control of the AVC. Presentations may be cancelled or their place in the programme altered. Extra sessions may be introduced or locations changed. When these things happen it is usually for good reasons but always without much notice, therefore the audiovisual organization must be flexible enough to cope without breaking down.

Briefing the staff

The AVC has two more tasks to fulfil before the conference begins and if possible they should be carried out on the same occasion. He will call a meeting in the main lecture theatre to which will be invited support staff, session executives, audiovisual receptionists. Session chairmen are normally briefed by conference committee but any chairmen who are available should be invited. Introductions are made and responsibilities outlined. When the audiovisual organization is described it is common for support staff to react with polite disbelief. However, it has been the author's experience that scepticism turns quickly to enthusiasm when the advantages of the system are realised and it is perceived that it will not interfere with normal working practices. Finally the AVC ensures that all staff have programmes, meal tickets and, when appropriate, access to conference bars and social events. This meeting is important not only for the dissemination of information, but because it helps to promote a team identity without which the audiovisual organization will be less successful.

Following the briefing the group will carry out a check of all audiovisual facilities. Whenever possible equipment should be duplicated because it is easier to change over equipment than to locate a fault under pressure. The equipment is tested and the picture size is checked as is the provision of lenses and condensers to permit format change. Controls for lights, screens, blackboards and ventilation are tested. The public address system is switched on and the position of microphones, including wander microphones, is confirmed. The location of the sound recordist, if any, will be examined to ensure that he can see platform and audience

simultaneously. Two-way telephone communication between chairman and projection area is checked.

Whenever possible facilities should be provided for the rapid production of slides and overhead projector transparencies. A final check is made of a myriad of small details such as spare lamps, fuses, reels, magazines and slide mounts.

Summary

This examination of the audiovisual organization for conferences has identified particular aspects which are considered to be of importance. These are:

1. The appointment of an audiovisual coordinator (AVC) to coordinate the organization.

2. The importance of early contact between the AVC and contributors, and between the AVC and the host institution.
3. Preview and controlled delivery of audiovisual material.
4. Use of an events chart as an aid to forecasting and identifying problems.
5. Employment of session executives.
6. Adequate briefing of audiovisual staff.

The system which has been outlined reduces many of the tasks of running a conference to a routine, thereby allowing difficulties and unexpected problems to be managed without causing undue disruption.