

Thank you from the 2013 Symposium Chair

By Graham Nasby, 2012 & 2013 Symposium Chair

Leading our symposium for the past 2 years has been a great experience, but now it's time for me to sing my swan song. But before I do, I'd like to take this opportunity to share some of my thoughts and insights on what it has been like coordinating our symposium for the past two years.

During the past 2 years our symposium has undergone an incredible resurgence. It has been quite an adventure to be involved with rebuilding our symposium from the humble state it was in back in 2011 to the very-successful conference that you see today.

Looking back to what I saw in 2011, I'm still not 100% sure why I took on the job at the time as 2012 symposium chair.

Things were looking pretty bleak in 2011. At the time the WWAC symposium was being held in St. Louis and was not well publicized. I had only heard about it by word of mouth from an ISA colleague. I was there as a speaker with a client of mine to give a talk about a SCADA Standardization project we had just undertaken. We were astonished to find on arrival that the 2011 symposium only had 31 attendees. Thankfully the technical content was good, but we were really scratching our heads about the low turnout. Especially with the knowledge that there are over 16,000 water plants and 21,000+ wastewater plants in the USA alone, and every single one of them makes use of SCADA.

So when I was approached by ISA leadership in late-2011 to be the 2012 symposium chair, I wasn't sure what to think. Why was an event that should be a slam-dunk doing so poorly?

The reasons were complex, but could be traced to a problem that had been years in the making. Due to a combination of retirements and staffing reductions because of the recession, many of the ISA staff and volunteers who used to make the symposium "work" simply were not there anymore. What was left was a much smaller staff apparatus and only a handful of volunteers – not exactly a recipe for success.

Once I had a good handle on the internal reasons the symposium was struggling, I then got on the phone with my vendor contacts to find out if there was interest. There was, but each had some friendly advice on how to approach it. These calls were then followed by several more to contacts I knew at water utilities and at other engineering firms. All said they would be interested in sending staff to a symposium for training but there were certain things they wanted to see. The symposium had to be in some way associated with the AWWA and WEF, the event had to give state-recognized CEU training credits (only possible with AWWA/WEF involvement) for operating staff, it had to be focused, it had to be affordable, and lastly it needed to have a critical mass of 200-300 attendees. It also wouldn't hurt if it was somewhere "fun" like in Orlando (think: Disney), and it should be in the summer so they could bring the kids. Also make sure it does not conflict with WEFTEC or ACE. So there was interest.

So then I made the harder phone calls, I called up my vendor contacts again and asked if they would support the symposium by verbally committing to be gold and platinum sponsors. Thus began the involvement of Schneider Electric, Phoenix Contact and Gray Matter Systems with the symposium. Others like Cooper Bussman and Trihedral soon followed.

With vendor support in hand, I then agreed to take on the role as 2012 symposium chair in late-2011. The rest sort-of just fell into place after that.

Many hands make light work, so I concentrated on building a large committee of volunteers for the symposium.

We moved the symposium back to its traditional home in Orlando, Florida for 2012. We found an inexpensive hotel and went back to the original early-August timeslot.

We launched a new symposium website at www.isawwsymposium.com and made extensive use of social media to promote the event. We made a new marketing plan.

We partnered up with the Florida AWWA, Florida WEA, the WEF Automation and Info Tech Committee, Instrumentation Testing Association and local ISA sections to co-promote each other.

But most of all we, as the symposium committee, listened to our stakeholders and the rest is history.

The stats speak for themselves. From just 31 attendees in 2011, we grew to 171 in 2012 and then 250 in 2013. The committee should be very proud of this accomplishment.

It's been a pleasure to be general symposium chair for the past 2 years, and I wish our incoming 2014 symposium chair Kevin Patel every success. He is inheriting a great team.



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