

### 3. PLANNING AN IMPORTANT CONFERENCE AT NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Vithal V. Athani\*

#### *Abstract*

*This paper is meant to provide guidance on how to plan an important national/international conference. At the outset, four phases of the conference are introduced : concept, planning, execution and post-conference wind-up. The work to be done in each phase is described in detail. The main and sub- themes, dates, size, site, sponsors and selection of chief guests and main speakers are determined by the Planning Cell. The main committees required to do detailed planning: steering, technical, organizing, and finance committees are set up. The functions of each committee are discussed in detail. The paper concludes with the work to be done after the conference is over, in order to bring it to a successful close.*

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Conferences (which term includes here Seminars and Symposia) are meant to bring together research workers, experts, industry representatives to take stock of the current status, emerging trends, and R&D opportunities in a particular field of interest. That is why Conferences are being arranged quite frequently at local, State, national and international levels.

Holding an important conference is a long drawn out and complex process requiring careful planning. Important conferences at national or international levels need typically 8 to 18 months of time for proper preparation. Meticulous planning, involving multiplicity of agencies is called for in making the conference successful. Young would-be organizers of conferences have enthusiasm, but lack knowledge of how to go about organizing a conference. There is little guidance available on how to plan such important conferences. This paper is aimed at fulfilling this

void, and at providing guidance on planning an important conference.

There are four phases in the lifecycle of a conference: concept, preparation, execution, and post-conference winding up phase. The main tasks to be performed are discussed below,

#### 2. THE CONCEPT PHASE

This phase starts typically 8 to 18 months in advance, with the constitution of the planning cell.

**2.1 Planning Cell:** consists of the Conference Chair-person, Organizing Secretary, Treasurer, and one or two key persons. It is the this Planning Cell that sets the wheel of the conference rolling, by taking the following crucial decisions:

**2.2 Theme and Sub-themes:** Deciding the main theme is the first crucial decision to be

---

\*Former Professor of Electrical Engineering, I.I.T.-Bombay,  
Former Dean, Cummins College of Engineering for Women, Pune.

taken. The main theme must be a topic of current research interest, or an emerging area of research activity. Sub-themes, constituting various aspects of the main theme or related areas, also need to be determined.

**2.3 Main Speakers:** A list of distinguished experts in the field of the main theme, Ministers and top ranking Government officials, and industry leaders is prepared as possible Chief Guest for inauguration or closing ceremonies, Key-Note Speakers, Invited Speakers, Panel Members, &c. Their consent is sought.

**2.4 Conference Dates:** are determined mainly to suit the convenience of the main speakers. The duration of the conference depends on the number of research papers expected to be presented thereat.

**2.5 Conference Size:** Depending on the number of delegates expected to attend, conferences are classified sizewise as indicated below:

Delegates	< 100	100-500	500-1000	> 1000
Size	small	medium	large	mega

The estimation of size is very important inasmuch as several vital decisions such as conference budget, site, accommodation, transport, food, registration, publicity, number of parallel session all depend on the size of the conference.

**2.6 Conference Budget:** is determined by the size, site, and duration of the conference, as well as the number of VIPs expected to attend. The registration and other fees are fixed, and fund raising measures are planned as per the estimated budget.

**2.7 Conference Site:** Choice of site of the conference is decided by the Conference size, dates, and availability.

It is usual to select a good five star hotel

having a hall large enough to accommodate the number of delegates expected to attend the conference.

Alternately, an auditorium in a university or college may be chosen. Some cities have an international convention center which could be selected if the rates are within the budget.

**2.8 Permissions:** Important conferences are usually held under the aegis of a national/international professional society (such as IEEE, ASME), industry/trade associations, universities, research labs, Government ministries/departments/agencies etc. Proposals containing information on Conference theme, site, size, dates and duration. are required to be made to the appropriate bodies seeking permission and sponsorship. It is only after the necessary permissions have been received that it is possible to go ahead with the conference.

**2.9 Constituting Committees:** The concept phase ends with constitution of committees for making detailed preparation for the conference. Three main committees need to be set up: Steering/Coordination Committee, Technical Committee, and Organizing Committee.

### 3. THE PREPARATION PHASE

Once the outline of the conference has been sketched, it is now time to get down to making detailed preparations for the conference. It is the duty of the committees constituted at the end of concept phase to do detailed preparations as discussed below.

**3.1 Steering/Coordination Committee:** This is the apex level committee consisting of distinguished persons from sponsoring agencies as Government department/agency, trade association, universities, industry, professional society, commerce/ trade association etc. It is a policy making body. Since the celebrities in this committee are usually very busy persons, this committee may meet just once before, once during and once after the conference. If meeting

in person is not feasible, teleconferencing may be resorted to. However, the celebrities included in this committee lend prestige and even glamour to the conference, and act as magnets for attracting delegates to the conference.

**3.2 Technical Committee:** is headed by The Organizing Secretary, and is made up of subject experts, heads of departments, and certain well known persons who are able and willing to devote time for conference work. The main tasks of this committee are as follows:

- To open a website for the Conference giving all the necessary information, and to keep it updated from time to time.
- To send out calls for papers, texts of inaugural address, keynote speeches, invited papers, etc.
- To draw up **time lines** for the Conference such as last dates for
  - (i) receipt of abstracts,
  - (ii) selection of papers for presentation,
  - (iii) intimation to authors of selected papers to submit full texts of the same
  - (iv) receipt of full texts,
  - (v) opening date for registration,
- To refer abstracts of papers received to members of Review Committee for selection of papers for presentation.
- To issue call to authors of selected papers, to send full texts in IEEE or any other standard format by the date stipulated in the time line.
- To follow up authors, invited speakers, keynote speakers to get full texts of their papers/addresses in time.
- To send abstracts of selected papers, inaugural and keynote addresses for printing in the *Souvenir/Conference Digest*, along with other relevant material.
- To arrange to get full texts of accepted papers plus texts of keynote addresses to be

brought out in hard copy (print) and/or soft copy (CD) form.

- To arrange with the VIP, who cannot physically attend the Conference, but offers to give his/her keynote address from his/her Office through teleconferencing medium.
- To ensure that the required equipment (OHP, multimedia projector, slide projector etc.) are not only installed but are also made fully operational in each hall wherein inauguration, and valedictory function, tutorial, technical session, and panel discussion is scheduled to be held.
- To provide any other technical support as and when required.

**3.3 Organizing Committee:** is chaired by the Chairperson of the Conference. It is in charge of administration, finance, food, registration, reception, transport, accommodation, social event, banquet (if any). Separate subcommittees may be set up for each of these tasks.

**3.4 Registration Committee:** In view of its importance, this committee is headed by a member of the Steering Committee, and performs the following functions:

- To compile mailing lists of prospective delegates in both hard copy (print) and soft copy (CD or database on a PC) forms.
- To design and get printed the Conference brochure containing the registration form, and mail / e-mail it to prospective delegates.
- To receive registrations for (i) the main conference, (ii) pre-conference tutorials, (iii) social/cultural event and banquet, (if separate fee for them is to be charged), (iv) local and outstation sight seeing tours, etc. in a variety of forms such as mail, fax, e-mail, or direct on-line form.
- To prepare a list of registered delegates, and mail/e-mail it to all committees.
- To make preparations for last minute, on-site registration on the first day of the conference / tutorials.
- To arrange to get adequate number of

delegate kits for issue to pre-registered delegates, as well as last-minute registrants.

**3.5 Accommodation Committee:** is in charge of arranging accommodation for the registered outstation delegates, and for VIPs.

Rooms in the same hotel in which the Conference is being held may be booked for VVIP delegates, especially foreign delegates. Less expensive rooms in nearby hotels or University/Company guesthouses may be booked for Indian as well as foreign VIPs.

As far as other delegates are concerned, it is better to let them know the room charges of nearby good hotels, and to let them select hotels of their choice.

Outstation student delegates need to be provided accommodation in students' hostels of nearby colleges at nominal charges.

**3.6 Local Transport Committee:** is meant to provide local transport to delegates. Reception desks may be opened at the airports, railway and bus stations to collect delegates and to transport them to their places of stay/Conference site.

Special arrangements have to be made for transport of VIPs by taxis, or limousines.

Local transport is needed for committee meetings set up during concept, planning, execution and windup phases of the conference and tutorials.

**3.7 Food Committee:** The function of this committee is to provide tasty and wholesome food to delegates at reasonable charges during tea/coffee breaks and lunches. The same hotel, in which the Conference is being held, usually provides food also.

It is desirable to include at least a few local or ethnic specialties in the food served, inasmuch as *"the way to a man's heart is through his stomach"*.

**3.8 Publicity Committee:** is charged with the responsibility of providing good publicity to the Conference in press and media. For this purpose, a press cum TV meet is scheduled on the eve of the Conference and exhibition. Also, adequate coverage, especially of the inauguration and closing functions, by the press and TV channels is arranged.

**3.9 Reception Committee:** has three different jobs to do:

Registration of delegates, especially VIP delegates, to the Tutorials and the Conference.

Welcoming and seating of delegates, especially VIP delegates, to the Conference and tutorials; conducting dignitaries to their seats on the dais at the inauguration and concluding sessions; special arrangements for seating of press and media representatives needs to be made.

Preparation of the main hall for inauguration and closing functions as well as for panel discussion warrants special attention.

**3.10 Social Event Committee:** After a long day of Conference activity, the Conference delegates deserve entertainment. The Social Event Committee is meant to provide this entertainment. The program of entertainment may include a judicious mix of music, dance, drama, humor, etc. Those delegates who can sing, play music, or dance are encouraged to present their art. A guest of honour may be invited to provide entertainment.

This event concludes with dinner. It is therefore planned before the banquet.

**3.11 Banquet:** Banquet may be planned as the logical conclusion of the Social Event.

The menu for the banquet has to be on a grander scale than the menu for the Conference lunches or dinners. The menu requires special attention and engagement of a special caterer if so warranted.

It is usual in foreign countries to provide one complimentary drink during the banquet. There is no such compulsion for conferences held in India. But it is desirable to have a "Cash Bar" service that will provide drinks to delegates on payment.

Transport needs to be arranged if the banquet is held at a place other than the Conference site.

#### 4. FINANCE COMMITTEE:

is one of the crucial committees formed for management of the income and expenditure of the Conference, and is hence headed by the Treasurer. The objective of this Committee is to keep a close watch on the income and expenditure of the conference.

**The sources of income** for the conference include:

- **Advances** received from professional societies, trade associations/bodies, Government department/agencies, university under aegis of which the Conference is being held.
- **Registration Fees for:** Pre-conference tutorials, and the main Conference.
- **Extra Charges (if applicable) for:** banquet, social and cultural events, accommodation, local and outstation tours.
- **Receipts for:** advertisements in Souvenir, Conference proceedings, Tutorial handouts, and other items.
- **Charges for:** booking stalls in exhibition, Conference Hall banners and displays, etc.
- **Sales of:** tutorial handouts, souvenir, and Conference proceedings.
- **Donations** received from individuals and organizations.

All moneys received must be duly accounted for, and official receipts issued for them.

**Major Heads of Expenditure** of the conference are as follows:

- (a) **Concept Stage:** Expenses for (i) planning cell meetings and travel. (ii) obtaining sponsorships and permissions, (iii) contacting and getting consent of keynote speakers for conference, and faculty for tutorials, guests of honour for inauguration and valedictory functions, and experts for panel discussion.
- (b) **Planning Stage:** Printing and mailing of brochures containing call for papers, and for registration, and for final program; review of abstracts and full papers by referees, honoraria to referees; setting up and updating conference website; sending abstracts of accepted papers as well as of keynote speeches for inclusion in Conference Souvenir; sending full texts of accepted papers and for printing conference proceedings and/or preparation of CD's, and handouts for tutorials.
- (c) **Registration:** Printing and mailing registration forms; preparing lists of registrants both in print and soft copy forms for the conference and tutorials, social event and banquet, local and/or outstation tours; making arrangements of multiple counters for quick registration of delegates to both conference tutorials, and issue of delegate kits and name tags; special arrangements for registration of VIP delegates.
- (d) **Accommodation:** booking for VIPs and other delegates, as well as for student delegates, and for conference organizers.
- (e) **Transport:** for VIPs and delegates, volunteers and conference organizers; artists for inaugural and valedictory functions; artists and chief guest for social event and banquet; for carrying conference material to and from conference site; for press and media representatives for publicity on the eve of, and during the conference, as well as exhibition; conference planning,



execution, and wind up meetings, and travel.

- (f) **Food:** arrangements for VIPs; breakfasts, tea/coffee and snacks, lunches, during conference and tutorials; dinners, banquet, and high tea at the end of the conference; tea/coffee and snacks during conference planning, execution and wind up meetings.
- (g) **Publicity:** Press and media meet on the eve of the conference and exhibition, press and media briefing kits, press and media coverage during inauguration, and valedictory functions of the conference as well as of the exhibition, sponsor and vendor banners, and displays, etc.
- (h) **Bouquets and mementos:** for presentation to dignitaries on the dais at inaugural and valedictory functions, and faculty of tutorials; to chairmen and authors of papers presented during technical sessions, panelists at the panel discussion.
- (i) **Decoration:** of the conference hall and the stage for inauguration and concluding sessions, keynote speeches, tutorials, including sponsors' banners and displays; of the exhibition site and stalls therein.
- (j) **Audio Visual Equipment:** procurement, set up and maintenance during the entire conference and tutorials.
- (k) **Auditing:** Getting tutorials and conference accounts prepared and audited, and sending them to sponsoring authorities, university and the college, etc.

## 5. THE EXECUTION PHASE

The D-day now arrives, when all the preparations done until now have to face the acid test. This phase is divided into the following

events.

**5.1 Pre-Conference Tutorials:** Registration counters are held open at least one hour before inauguration. All pre-registered participants are checked in. Similarly, last-minute registrants are also duly registered and checked in. All checked in participants are issued tutorial kits, and ushered into the hall where the tutorial will be held.

The tutorial is inaugurated by the Chairperson of the Steering Committee. Thereafter the responsibility for conduction and success of the tutorial lies squarely with the organizers of the tutorial. The conference organizers are responsible only for providing the venue and food service.

**5.2 The Main Conference:** Registration counters opened at least one hour before inauguration. All pre-registered delegates have to be checked-in in time for the inauguration. Multiple registration counters are needed for quick check-in. Separate counters for last-minute registrants are required to be provided. All checked-in delegates are issued Conference kits and name tags, and are ushered in by volunteers into the main hall for inauguration.

### 5.3 The Inauguration Ceremony:

**Checking the Preparations** for this crucial function starts with checking of the decorations, stage arrangements including name plates of dignitaries on the dais, availability of bouquets and mementos, at least one hour before the function. It is particularly important to ensure that the mikes, both fixed to the pulpit and hand-held, are working. Volunteers in sufficient numbers ought to be available for guiding delegates to their seats. Arrangements for invocation and lighting of the lamp, etc. is to be done by the Reception Committee. This committee has also to ensure that inauguration program copies, and name plates of the dignitaries on the dais have been placed, and for ensuring the presence of the *compere*/master of ceremony.

**5.4 The Inauguration Ceremony** starts off with the Conference Chairperson ushering in the Chief Guest, and other dignitaries into the main hall, and escorting them to their seats on the dais.

The program begins with the invocation song. The Chairperson formally welcomes all the dignitaries on the dais, as well as all delegates. Presentation of bouquets and mementos to dignitaries is followed by lighting of the ceremonial lamp, and formal declaration of the Conference open by the President.

The Chairperson of Technical Committee gives a brief outline of the Conference.

Next major events are, formal introduction, followed by delivery of Inaugural Address, by Presiding Officer; introduction followed by Keynote Address by the Chief Guest.

The inaugural function concludes with vote of thanks by the Organizing Secretary, followed by refreshments.

**5.5 The Invited Speeches:** by eminent experts constitute the main attraction of the conference, These speeches are held in the main conference hall at *Plenary Sessions* which all delegates are expected to attend.

The program of the invited speeches typically consists of the distinguished speaker being ushered in by Chairperson, Technical Committee, or by a Member of Steering Committee. After formal introduction of and presentation of memento to the speaker, The Invited Speaker delivers his/her Invited speech. Formal vote of thanks is followed by refreshments.

**5.6 Technical Sessions:** Depending on the number of papers to be presented, it may be necessary to program parallel sessions. In each case, each technical session is inaugurated and conducted by The Session Chairperson. *The Rapporteur* keeps records of the number of delegates attending the Session, papers

presented, and also prepares a Report on the session.

It is a good practice to devote at least 20-30 minutes per paper, including presentation by one of the authors (typically 15-20 minutes), and discussion thereon (typically 5-10 minutes).

**5.7 Technical Visit:** is usually hosted by a Company. It is the duty of the Organizing Committee to see to it that the delegates who have registered for the visit are present at the scheduled time and place. Thereafter, it is the responsibility of the host Company to transport the delegates, to show them around, and to bring them back, in time for the next program.

**5.8 Social Event:** is held as planned in Section 3.2 above. Transportation is needed if this event is not held at the Conference venue.

This event starts off with the introduction of the Chief Guest who is a distinguished person in music, dance, drama or other cultural/social service field. A variety entertainment program by college students or by professional artists is then held. The performance/address of the chief guest concludes the program.

Delegates are encouraged to participate in the variety entertainment The delegates program. The author has enjoyed a beautiful piano recital by Dr. Raja Ramanna at one of the conferences he attended. His piano recital in fact dominated the entire cultural event.

In conferences held abroad, party dancing is included wherein delegates enjoy dance with their spouses. There is no such compulsion for conferences held in India.

**5.9 Banquet:** is held as programmed in Section 3.13 It is usual to have an entertaining speech just before dinner as the appetizer. A special speaker may be invited for this purpose. A formal toast is raised, for which one complimentary drink may be provided as far as possible.

Prize distribution ceremony may also be held

during the banquet.

The dinner is then served; The banquet is a usually a sit-in dinner.

The delegates are transported back after the banquet.

**5.10 Panel Discussion:** if planned, is the star feature and high point of the Conference.

This program starts with ushering in of the distinguished panelists and their formal introduction by the Conference Chairperson, and presentation of mementos to the panelists. The panelists are then given about five minutes each to express their views on the topic under discussion. The panelists then answer questions raised by the members of the audience. The discussion concludes with a formal vote of thanks by the Organizing Secretary/Chairperson, Technical Committee.

**5.11 Concluding Session / Valedictory function:** A special Chief Guest may be invited for this event. If the Steering Committee finds that there are two equally distinguished persons in the field covered by the Conference, then one of them is invited as the Chief Guest for the Inaugural function, and the other for the Valedictory Function.

This Function starts with ushering in of the Chief Guest, welcome with a bouquet and a memento, and his/her formal introduction by The Conference Chairperson.

A report on the conference is presented by the Chairperson, Technical Committee.

The Valedictory Address is then delivered by the Chief Guest.

After a formal vote of thanks by The Organizing Secretary, the Conference Chairperson formally declares the Conference closed. This is followed by high tea. The Conference ends and everybody concerned with it heaves a sigh of relief.

## 6. POST CONFERENCE WINDING UP

But this sigh of relief is short lived; because there is a lot of winding up work to be done. The main tasks to be performed are:

- To mail formal letters thanking all VIP's, sponsors, vendors, advertisers for their support.
- To pay up all outstanding bills, and to recover outstanding dues, especially from advertisers.
- To prepare a statement of accounts containing a record of all incomes generated, all expenditures incurred, and balance remaining, if any. The Treasurer and his/her Finance committee are responsible for this task.
- To get the accounts duly audited by a Government certified Auditor.
- To prepare a Report on the conference, and to dispatch it, along with audited statement of accounts, to the professional society, trade/industry association, Government agency/research institution, which was kind enough to grant permission to hold the Conference under its aegis, and to other concerned authorities.
- To utilize the balance amount as decided by the Steering Committee, and to close the conference account as well as the Conference web-site.
- To record the lessons learnt for future guidance.

## REFERENCES

1. Bhattacharya, A, Lahiri, B.N., & Saha, J., *"Forms and Formalisms of Seminars and Conferences"*, The Institution of Engineers, Calcutta, 1991.
2. Vilgen, R., *"Conference Planning Guidelines,"*
3. *Conference Planning Manual*", Wisconsin Association of Academic Librarians, 1998.

(Cont. on page No. 39)