

Meeting matters

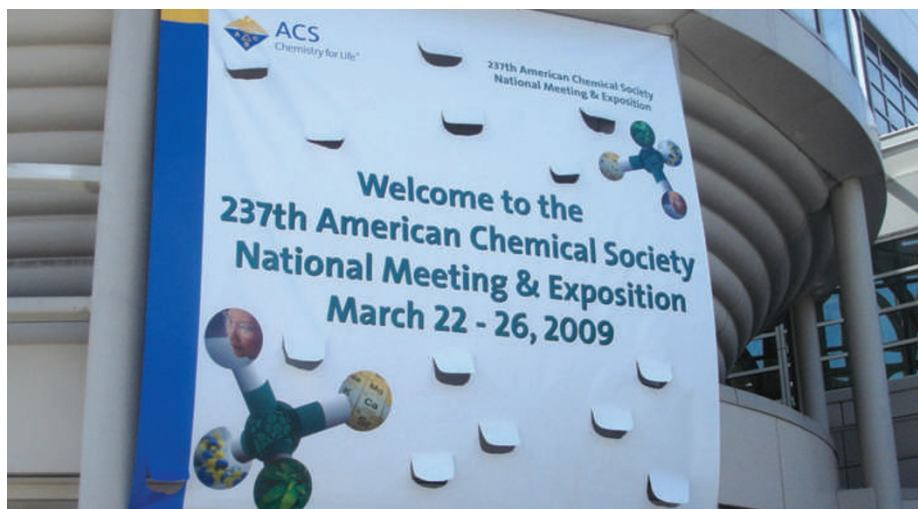
Is the traditional conference format still relevant in today's better-connected world, or should new ways of presenting data and ideas at chemistry meetings be explored?

Although scientific conferences come in all shapes and sizes, more often than not they follow a tried and trusted formula. Invariably there are talks and poster sessions — with researchers higher up the academic totem pole giving the longer lectures, those lower down giving shorter talks, and finally, the graduate and undergraduate students presenting posters describing their work. Sometimes larger meetings also host expositions, where companies display their wares and try to entice potential customers by giving away promotional items — although most of these seem to be snapped up by the aforementioned students.

At this point, it is worth stepping back and posing a very simple question: what are the aims of scientific conferences? Do they exist to provide a forum in which researchers can discuss their most recent results with their peers, make announcements of startling new discoveries, and help educate the younger members of the community who are fortunate enough to be there? Before the rise of the internet, these motives were almost certainly some of the more powerful ones. Scientific discourse by letter is obviously very slow; telephones are useful up to a point, but chemistry is a very visual subject — it was surely the case that convening large numbers of researchers in one location greased the wheels of collaboration and discovery.

But is this still the case today? At larger mainstream conferences, the time devoted to scholarly discussion — at least in the official sessions — is somewhat limited at best. Although in jest, it has been said that 'plenary' is the Latin word for 'no questions' — and some of the more high-profile sessions at conferences, especially those associated with the giving of awards, do little to dispel this notion. Perhaps the scale of some meetings make extended discussion impractical as part of the formal schedule, but shorter talks and more questions would probably foster debate, and that is an important part of what drives science forward.

It may be different in some other fields, but how often is the latest breakthrough in chemistry announced at a conference? Priority is of paramount importance — often for both historical and financial reasons — and such claims in today's world are



A snowy Salt Lake City played host to the Spring 2009 National Meeting of the American Chemical Society.

based on papers and patents. This being the case, much of the research presented at 'open' meetings has already appeared in the scientific literature. Therefore, unless the speaker is particularly engaging, or provides additional details that are not available as part of the published work, a significant number of talks are simply old news and fail to hold the audience's attention. On the other hand, it is only right that a researcher should be wary of presenting new results when they could appear in a matter of seconds on a blog or a website such as Twitter.

Some smaller, more focused meetings — such as the Gordon Research Conferences — do provide a closed environment; a condition of attendance is that all information presented there is treated as private communications between the delegates. Moreover, it is generally expected that participants arrive for the start of the conference and remain there until the very end — although not everyone plays by the rules. Sequestered away from the hustle and bustle of the real world, delegates are immersed in a scientific topic for a short, but concentrated, period of time — and afternoons are left free for informal discussions.

Turning to the question of education, if there is little discussion and scant new science presented at a meeting, then how useful are they to the aspiring young

scientist? This is where big conferences, such as National Meetings of the American Chemical Society, come into their own. Apart from rubbing shoulders with the 'household' names of their research fields, simply soaking up the atmosphere of a large meeting can be a useful learning experience, not to mention the contacts that can be made. It also offers many students the first opportunity to present their own results to peers outside their own departments. Moreover, it exposes them to a broad range of science — even if it is published work — that they would otherwise be unaware of, which allows them to set their own work in a wider context.

Finally, with many organizations striving to adopt 'greener' policies, another factor to consider is whether the environmental cost associated with transporting hundreds or thousands of chemists to the same place can be justified? Although it may not satisfy our wanderlust, the internet now enables huge amounts of information to be viewed, shared and discussed at the click of a button — with the online virtual world 'Second Life' playing host to conferences of its own. It seems clear that conferences are — in one form or another — an important part of science, but they need to adapt so that they better align with developments in information technology and our desire for a cleaner planet. □