

conferences no longer raise my blood pressure. Mac Expo, a sizzler of an exhibition in Silicon Valley, zapped my systolic with sound, colour, and animation — multimedia. At the Special Libraries Association 1990 conference it was hotel hassles and boothmanship . . . and hordes of Jehovah's Witnesses.

And Pittsburgh? What a convention spot. Pitts (as cynical outsiders call it) no longer smells like Hell's locker room. It has some high-tech business, notably Komputerwerk (a source for programming tools and BIOS chip sets) and Black Box (one of the large suppliers of network hardware in the US). Tony Carbo Bearman and colleagues have shaped the University of Pittsburgh's library and information science program into one of the most comely in North America. Almost across the street, Carnegie-Mellon University (né Carnegie Tech) has reached the top tier of engineering schools.

One handicap Pittsburgh has is that an author of an 'instant' book named it as one of the best 25 American cities in which to live. So what happens? Conventions flood the town. In fact, both the SLA and Jehovah's Witnesses on the same day! Predictably this home to 19 major corporations developed cracks in its walls.

The day before the Special Libraries Association conference opened, 3000 nitro-methane corporate librarians flamed into town. The majority of these SLAers are female, well-paid, smart, and used to dealing with life's ups and downs.

One of the main hotels — the Pittsburgh Hilton — thought it was United Airlines and overbooked. No problem in a the Big Apple or a Frisco. But in the Pitts, the closest hotel was in Monroeville (a 50-minute trek in rush hour) or the restful Holiday Inn Airport (a one-hour battle on an average day).

The mayor of Pitts and the city's convention bureau apparently obfuscated the

INFORMATION TERRITORIES

HOTEL HASSELS AND BOOTHMANSHIP AT SLA CONFERENCE

Stephen Arnold

Dateline: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania —
Maybe I'm jaded but information industry

hotel situation to SLA conference planners. As I write this I can visualize the mayor and his cronies saying "We done this librarians and Jehovah's Witnesses darn good." (Once maybe but not twice, Mr Mayor.)

Consider the plight of Linear Christiani, MLS, from Berkeley, California. (For readers unfamiliar with University of California-Berkeley, associate these words: 'top notch,' 'aggressive,' 'feminist movement,' and 'motivated')

She and 35 other female special librarians arrived at the Pittsburgh Hilton about 1800 hours and presented their computer-generated room confirmation forms at check in. The assistant manager (James Marino) said, "No rooms. We'll get you space at the airport."

Modern American hotels have networks and systems which tell the desk clerks stuff. For example, an untrained clerk (the most common variety) can determine (sometimes) that a room is available. And miracle of miracles when the clerk enters the name of a guest, the software subtracts that room from the pool of those available. Data are wonderful.

Back to Ms Christiani: she shows up after a fun-filled seven-hour journey from Berkeley, flashes her six-count 'em-six computer-generated confirmations. The first carried a date of "16 April 1990" and the most recent a date of "8 June 1990." (The conference opened 9 June 1990.) And to speed her check in, the Pitts Hilton had thoughtfully billed her credit card \$110 for her first night.

Ms Christiani explained to Assistant Manager Marino that her colleagues had checked into their rooms and that she was not a happy camper. Mr Marino, not skilled in the art of managing bright, articulate, aggressive graduates of Berkeley, found himself out-argued and intellectually outgunned.

He responded, "Get out. You'll get no room here during this show. Go away." Pity that Mr Marino did not read Conrad Hilton's

autobiography *Be My Guest*. Mr Hilton writes on page 258: "My hotel philosophy agrees with that of Boswell as expressed in his *Life of Dr. Johnson*: 'There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn.'"

Ms Christiani secured herself a suitable room in the Pittsburgh Hyatt Regency. She called Hilton reservations' 800 number and obtained a room for the next night. She confirmed this room with another Pitts Hilton manager (Mitch Lutton). Bright and early the next morning, she schlepped her bags across town to the Hilton. Assistant Manager Marino promptly denied her the room. So back to the Hyatt trudged Ms Christiani. She occupied herself writing letters to various Hilton executives and informing colleagues about what became known among the 3000 SLA attendees as "the Hilton hilt."

Why include this in "Information Territories"? If a reader plans to attend a conference in the US of A., the moral is: "Don't count on your hotel room." Wise visitors will get two, maybe three, confirmations just to be sure...sort of.

The SLA is a victim like Ms Christiani. The association is trying to keep the cost of attending such functions as low as possible. Many associations are abandoning high-priced cities like New York and San Francisco, for more moderately-priced locales. These will be second-, even third-tier American villes whose names I neither know nor can spell.

In addition to the hotel snafu, there was one significant information event at the conference: the Booth Wars started. Exhibitors came down with a violent outbreak of booth envy.

Symptoms appeared five minutes after the exhibits opened on Day 1 of the conference. Disclosure, Inc. (Bethesda, Maryland), the original deliverers of Securities & Exchange Commission documents, revved its marketing engines and everyone heard. Disclosure

pulled away from their competition and got the Winner's Cup for visibility. (I really like this company's style.)

The Disclosure staff donned flashy red, black, and white jackets, embroidered with a glitzy 'Team Disclosure' logo. Their booth, a beefy buckaroo, sprawled over ten 10' x 10 space. Disclosure's marketers turned the booth into a race-car staging area.

Brightly-coloured, pasteboard Formula One racers ringed the booth's perimeter. Behind every race car was a Disclosure CD-ROM demo spitting out high-performance images with 12-cylinder ferocity, fast document delivery and fast cars.

Visitors received a free Team Disclosure drinking bottle. These are like the ones used by real race drivers. (Keep yours near your Disclosure workstation for a quick pick-me-up or give it to your child for a big smile.) Special librarians who never bought a 1 O-K in their lives queued in long lines for one of these show-stealing give-aways.

Steve Goldspiel, Disclosure's president, grinned for the full run of SLA. He was the most visible executive at the conference. Disclosure's public relations firm had the savvy to pay a pre-conference visit to Pittsburgh. The advance people invited key Pittsburgh-area business and technology reporters to a free lunch/briefing. At the chow down, the learned members of the Fourth Estate discovered nifty electronic information products just like the ones Disclosure sells. A week before the conference opened, the PR staff set up interviews for Mr Goldspiel.

Thus, Mr Goldspiel became the ex officio tour guide for Pittsburgh journalists. A cordial and clever host, he tactfully avoided the Bechtel stand, sidestepped any database producers he believed inappropriate for the Pittsburgh writers to meet, and explained the information industry to the impressionable TV, radio, and print reporters.

On Day 2 of the conference, everyone found a beaming Mr Goldspiel in the Pittsburgh Press's business section. He received 12 column inches of copy and warranted a three column by five inch photograph. For the tele-addicts, Mr Goldspiel popped up on the evening news on two stations and snagged 15 seconds on a national newscast on Day 3 of the conference.

So what's the impact of a booth blitz like this?

Mr Goldspiel has started 'The Great Library Marketing Nuclear Booth War.' In the months ahead, macho marketers at other companies will build flashier, more innovative, and more clever theme booths. Conference managers may have to add more classes to their best-booth-in-show contests. Some exhibits will rest on motorized chassis. Presumably their owners will drive them in parades like Macy's Thanksgiving Day procession. The plain vanilla booth will be a double-wide just to show off a database properly.

Will content get lost in the race to be visible? Of course. At the American Library Association show in Chicago, Illinois, held two weeks after SLA, UMI (Ann Arbor, Michigan) stimulated booth traffic with a roulette wheel and a microphone-equipped barker. Gambling seemed to help when the wheel was spinning and prizes flowing. Give these folks a year in which to plan and we might see dancing bears or gladiators doing battle.

No escaping it: hard-nosed, serious-money marketing has come to the information industry. Even if the products are gat-toothed and sway-backed, the stands will be entertaining. Mr Goldspiel told me "Because of the Pittsburgh success, we'll use this approach in every city in which we open a new Disclosure document delivery office."

I guess I will see some memorable booths parked in exhibition rooms in the midst of America's most economical cities. Bet the hotels are super too. Ever been to a

conference in Grants, New Mexico; Moab' Utah; or Peoria, Illinois? Me neither. But soon, folks, soon.

Companies mentioned in this essay:

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