

Behind the Scenes

with Kurt Hertzog



Woodturning Symposiums

If you have never been to a regional or national woodturning symposium, you really have missed one of the wonders of sharing woodturning. The learning and shopping opportunities are incredible. If you have been to a symposium, you may not appreciate the actual planning and mechanics of what it takes to make it happen. Like a theater visit, you pay the admission, hopefully enjoy the show, and then you leave. You usually don't know (and perhaps don't care) how it all happened. It just happened.

This issue's Behind the Scenes column is a look at how it all happens. It is a composite of three symposiums: the Totally Turning Symposium in Saratoga Springs, New York, in March each year; the Utah Woodturning Symposium in Provo, Utah, in May each year; and the AAW Symposium, which changes sites each year and is held in June. Being involved with the planning and execution in some way for all three events, I'm struck by the amazing similarities. All three are very different, yet very much alike.

PLANNING

All three of these symposiums are annual events. There is a core team with members who manage each event, and their planning usually begins at least a year ahead of time. The AAW is a moving symposium, so site selection is done years ahead to secure compatible sites with the dates needed. Site selection is an intensive effort, and those symposiums that are in the same location each year are spared that site analysis and selection effort. The closeout of any symposium is usually a debriefing of the just completed event. The analysis of what went right, what went wrong, and what suggestions should be implemented in the future takes place. This debriefing is fairly standard, as each symposium committee is dedicated to a successful, yet continually improving, event.

The core team is supported by additional team members who come into play at various times during the year. There are teams dedicated to speaker selection, advertising, trade show, equipment planning and acquisition, food planning, parking, lodging, admissions, merchandising, auction and fund-raising, volunteer recruiting and management, security, and more. Even though the three symposiums mentioned are dramatically different in size, they are all nearly identical in their needs, other than site selection.

The planning goes on all year because demonstrators

need to be identified and are often booked at least a year ahead to ensure their availability. Though there are a huge array of details that need to be attended to, the symposium teams have refined their planning and execution to a checklist and timing schedule. Each and every task is documented and the volunteers who attend to them have the facets and timing identified. These planning guides are a work in progress and are being continually refined as each year offers changes and improvements.

A few key points that many attendees of any symposium may not appreciate are the number of people it takes to plan and execute the event, the amount of support provided by clubs/vendors/institutions, and the volunteerism that makes it happen. Other than the featured demonstrators who are paid a small honorarium for their rotations, almost everyone else donates their time and effort for free. Even the rotational honorariums are indeed that—a token of appreciation, but not nearly the demonstrators' usual fees. The regional and national symposiums are volunteer driven, and without each volunteer's dedication and donation of effort, none of the woodturning symposiums would exist.

EXECUTION

Okay, a year of planning and preparation is over and now it is "showtime." The demonstrators and attendees begin to arrive at the event location. For the most part, they didn't see the massive preparation that took place the day before. The logistics of the delivery of equipment and materials needs to be in place on the day before the event. The facility is being rented by the day, so there isn't the luxury of having a week to ship in all the needed materials and equipment. Usually, they have been stored nearby for delivery on "setup day." Setup day is the day before the event. The floodgates open and everyone must get their materials in, laid out, wired, debugged, and tested to be prepared for the start of the event.

What started as an empty loading dock and bare floor space is suddenly transformed into a host of trucks queued for unloading—with everything from chairs to bunting being deployed. Each team of volunteers springs into action to set up tables, lay out merchandise, prepare demo rooms and equipment, set up the instant gallery, prepare the registration area, and more. To see it is similar



The facility, whether a convention center, religious retreat, or fairground, goes about its daily business as the woodturning symposium approaches.



On the morning of setup day, everything changes for the vendors and volunteers working on the symposium—the docks and forklifts are running full tilt.



The empty trade show floor begins to fill up with equipment and products for the many vendors at the show.



Some booths can be set up quicker than others, but everyone is in a hurry to be ready by the time the trade show floor setup closes that evening.



Once a booth is set up, it is time to do the refinements and even kick back for a slight rest in preparation for the next few hectic days.



Meanwhile, in other parts of the facility, the preparations are being made for other parts of the event. Here, the instant gallery floor is readied for the instant gallery drop-offs.



The demo and special purpose rooms are set up with floor coverings, lathes, grinders, projection and audio equipment, and materials. These volunteers are setting up the Youth Turning room.



The registration and organization product sales areas are set up and stocked for the coming rush of registrants.



Preparations are done and “it’s showtime” as the gates open for registration, package pickup, and exploration of the site to get the lay of the land.



The attendees scurry to the instant gallery to get their items checked in and to stake out prime locations on the display tables.



The national symposiums have opening ceremonies on the morning of the event opening—the regional symposiums vary. Shown here are the opening ceremonies at the AAW Symposium.



Opening day of the event, everything begins in earnest. The rotations begin and will continue for the next two to three days.



The trade show floor gets crowded the moment the doors open. A highlight for many is the ability to try things out and compare all the various products side by side in person.



The instant gallery is a big draw for the symposium attendees. Not only is it possible to get feedback and a potential sale for their work, but they can also get inspirational ideas from other pieces.



The AAW and the Utah Woodturning Symposium have a banquet on one of the evenings. The sit-down dinner is also an auction to raise funds for educational programs.



The symposium continues for two or three days, depending on the event, with time for trade show, rotations, old friend gatherings, instant gallery visits, and more.



At the conclusion of the last rotation, the entire process reverses itself and the show begins to melt away.



Purchases that were made at the symposium get loaded, which often offers its own special challenges.



The instant gallery begins to disappear, slowly at first and then with amazing speed.



In less than half the time for setup, the bustling trade show vanishes before your eyes in only a few hours.



The last bits of equipment get removed as the facility inspection takes place, ensuring that it is left the way it was found.

to watching a building being built in a time-lapse camera. What started with nothing is transformed in less than a day into a stage with everything prepared for the show opening the next day. Meanwhile, over the course of the day and actually throughout the event, the crisis team deals with delayed shipments, broken or missing equipment, demonstrator changes, larger-than-expected attendance, facility breakdowns, and other unexpected problems.

The event takes place beginning with the attendees rushing for the registration tables and staking out their chairs in the demo rooms. For two or three days, depending on the event, the rotations go on, the trade show happens, the gathering of old friends occurs, the special events take place, and generally everyone shares the camaraderie of their common bond—woodturning. Far too quickly, except for those working the event, it is all over. The setup process reverses itself and everything must disappear by the end of the day. The last day of the show is planned to be a bit shorter to allow time for teardown and being offsite by the close of the day.

IT'S OVER

Teardown goes from business as usual to a mad dash for the exit doors. All of a sudden, there are massive price reductions on the trade show floor, since vendors often would rather sell at little or no profit rather than pack and ship stuff home. The instant gallery begins to thin and then disappear before your eyes. The tables that were full only hours before have become less full and then nearly empty until the last stragglers are packed or sold. While the symposium attendees are headed for the airport or the drive home, the teams of volunteers spring into action again. Much like the setup, each team has its responsibilities to return the site to empty by the close of business. The trade show disappears back into trucks now back at the loading dock. The vacuuming and cleanup crews attend to the demo rooms. The equipment teams clean, inventory, and pack up tools, equipment, and materials borrowed from local clubs, vendors, or individuals.

Like magic, empty space that had been transformed in less than a day into an event with hundreds or thousands of woodturners returns to empty space in less than half a day. The hustle and bustle of the crowd turns into the hustle and bustle of the teardown crew, which then turns into empty space and silence. As the volunteer crews finish their final tasks, the facility people check over the cleanup and inspect for any damages. As quickly as the event came, it is gone. Days later, or perhaps a few weeks, the members of the symposium core committee will meet to debrief. Though they all probably made notes during the event, it is key that they have their debriefing soon after the event so that everything is fresh in their minds. The planning for the following year begins in earnest as quickly as the lights are turned out at the last event.



Until next year, would the last one out please turn out the lights?