

in the final analysis

“They say, timing is everything. But then they say, there is never a perfect time for anything.”

—Anthony Liccione

I write this column in the midst of the imperfectly timed Coronavirus outbreak in the U.S. In many states, mine included, restaurants and “non-essential” businesses are closed, grocery stores are experiencing runs on paper and disinfecting products, social distancing is the new form of social intercourse as gatherings limit themselves to 10 or fewer people, and TMS staff is all working remotely to do our part to reduce the risk of community transmission. As you read this column roughly two months in the future, I wonder what you definitely know and about which I can only speculate. . . . Are things better, worse, about the same? Is the disease suppressed? Has life gotten back to something resembling normal? Have investment markets (and my 401K) rebounded? Have countries unlocked themselves and travel resumed? Are associations conducting conferences once more? I wonder, wonder, wonder. . . .

While Quarter 2 is full of unknowns, Quarter 1 was a good one for TMS. We had a very successful TMS 2020 Annual Meeting & Exhibition (TMS2020) in San Diego, California, during late February. Coronavirus was certainly making its presence felt at the time, but it was largely confined to China, and the impact on our event was primarily through the absence of roughly 200+ Chinese attendees. That’s a big impactful community to lose from our highly international event. The absence of the Chinese put aspects of the technical program in a difficult spot. However, our staff, organizers, session chairs, and other volunteers responded creatively and effectively to assure that as few glitches as possible were visible to event participants. Knowing that there were universal concerns about Coronavirus, we were proactive in communication about the situation with attendees, worked with the facilities to assure that hygiene was enhanced, and had health professionals on site as a precaution. I heard nary a cough or sniffle.

By the end of meeting week, TMS2020 was our best attended event (by 13) with 4,681 attendees. We also received a record number of abstracts for a TMS event—5,183. If things would have been “normal,” we might have scratched the 5,000 attendee level. TMS2020 was also rich in experimentation and innovation. We had a new app with more user tools. We piloted a new approach to our poster session, with invited posters and video poster displays (no thumb tacks!). We tried the next “big thing” in conferencing—silent sessions, where participants listened to presenters by using ear buds and transponders that could be dialed to any one of the ten wall-less session rooms constructed in a single hall. We learned a lot about future pathways for next-generation TMS meetings. That learning is continuing today even as Coronavirus reshapes the conference landscape.

On returning from San Diego and TMS2020, COVID-19 immediately overtook the world and the conference community with major event after major event being postponed or, worse, canceled. Canceling a meeting is a very difficult decision for we nonprofits as contracted event facilities and hotels can impose heavy penalties for failure to satisfy performance clauses. These penalties can range from five to seven figures in U.S. dollars. The damage is compounded by lost revenue to support other aspects of the mission and operation. Unfortunately, as many associations are finding, contract language concerning force majeure and insurance policies are slippery enough that they are hard to invoke under all but the most precise circumstances. Many executive directors have frowny faces over this.

So, reader in the future, will TMS and other associations soon find themselves in good position to return to normalcy? I’m hoping so, and I’m looking forward to the day when the only lasting effect of this particular crisis is us wondering what to do with all of the leftover hand sanitizer that we never had to use.

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