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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- The 2006 Charleston Conference

Editor

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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — The 2006 Charleston Conference

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gotten used to coming back to find the conference grown larger, and who might wish they had from the routines of years of legend.

Is Charleston too big in relation to its space? Now, maybe we’re on to something. The conference used to be anchored by the Lightsey Conference Center, a facility since closed by its owner, the College of Charleston, leaving the conference unmoored. Home base ever since has been the adjacent Francis Marion Hotel, always a venue integral to the conference and one perfect in that supporting role, with a wide light-filled lobby providing just the place to meet dinner companions or business contacts; a café steps away where coffee, fresh juice, or a snack was always available, served up by reliably inefficient, multiple-crippled student-workers from the nearby campus; or best of all, the Swamp Fox Bar, downstairs and slightly out of the way, a small comfortable room, dark and enclosing, where no matter the registration numbers, a table or seat always seems available for escape from the demands of the conference or, later, to extend an evening begun at one of the city’s restaurants.

But as conference mother ship, the Marion creaks in the gaze of registration, pre-conferences, plenary and concurrent sessions, vendor fair, juried forums, coffee breaks, breakfasts, and the scores of densely-scheduled events comprising the rest of the conference. A thousand attendees move from session to session up and down hallways and staircases like so many sailors finding their stations among passageways too narrow for a crew of this size. The hotel is a 1924 building honored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as one of the country’s “Historic Hotels of America,” ones that have “faithfully maintained their historic architecture and ambiance,” as the HHA Website puts it.

That the Marion has. No sterile, lookalike, modular meeting spaces here. Never are there enough seats for the plenary sessions, for example. Even the overflow accommodation, where one floor up telecasts of live events are shown in a grand, wooden-floored, chandeliered ballroom, flows over with standees who fall into willing conversation with one another, just as live standees are downstairs beside the main, live, Carolina Ballroom. The smaller sessions that follow, held in meeting rooms named for South Carolina statesmen Pinckney, Rutledge, and Calhoun, are more accessible; unless, that is, a topic or speaker overmatch the concurrent offerings, as, for example, a Google representative did a couple of years ago, creating impossible logjams outside the room and leaving the earlybirds who managed seats inside, in the heat and crowdedness, envioas of the those outside who didn’t.

Charleston isn’t principally about sessions anyway. By Friday afternoon, frequently sooner, many conference-goers have had their fill. Programs held in ballrooms begin to resemble the stands at a baseball game toward the end of a rain delay, with diehards scattered here and there but everyone else gone. By then Charleston attendees have taken the conference to the streets; that is, to visit the city’s first-rate shops and restaurants, steps away; or to see the exquisite neighborhoods that are only a few minutes beyond that; or to enjoy memorable views from the Battery, a somewhat longer, utterly pleasant walk. Charleston is, far and away, the best conference there is to get away from.

What Charleston is really about though is not the tourism, invigorating as that always is, and not the sessions, invigorating as they sometimes are. What people come back for are those close encounters in the hallways, that sureness of bumping into someone, often literally, whom you want to talk to, or need to talk to, or would like to talk to. You can scheme to bump into people easily enough, if you want. You’ll also bump into people you don’t know, and can talk to them as well, if you feel like it. You can keep an eye on your vendors, your customers, your competitors. Nobody will be far away; that’s guaranteed. It’s the clusters of conversation that occur all day long, at seats by the iron railing of the small mezzanine overlooking the lobby, or on the lobby sofas below, or within the fastness of the Swamp Fox, or in any hallway connecting the meeting rooms, or at the coffee urns at breaktimes, or anywhere the length of King or Market Streets, that make Charleston unique.

Charleston is mainly about conversation. You can have as much as you want, starting early at breakfast if you like (of course many do not); sign up for a “Lively Lunch” if you need more, for moderated table conversation and a boxed meal; then hit stride in late afternoon over a drink or two; not to forget the Conference Reception, if it’s Thursday; to put you in form for your dinner group, any evening, before winding down prior to bed at the Swamp Fox or some other welcoming nightlife venue. It’s not, of course, the virtues of open access, the meaning of Web 2.0, or the future of the MARC record that everyone is necessarily talking about the day long. Personal updates, gossips among friends, acquaintances, or anyone at all, and normal small talk more than hold their own against weighty concerns in the precincts of conversation at Charleston.

Conversation and all of the more perfumatory forms of personal interaction — handshakes, arm squeezes, pats on the back, full embraces, waves of the hand across a room or street; how are you, excuse me, good to see you; silent eye contact, avoidance of eye contact, уверенess on whether there was any eye contact, furtive glances at the name badge — these take a serious toll on most of us. A toll, that is, when the density of contact — and there must be some scientific study on this sort of thing — reaches the level of a Charleston Conference, where it seems that no moment passes without some degree of personal contact.

The beauty of Charleston, once again, is that it’s so easy to escape. If you’re a Francis Marion guest, just get on the elevator and in a minute or two you’re back in the stillness of your room, which at that moment seems not as Lilliputian as it did when you checked in, but instead private, protected, womblike, secure. Twenty minutes, an hour, an afternoon alone, and you will be ready to set out again, ready to face anything the world can throw at a conventioneer. If you are not a Marion guest then your room may be a ten-minute walk instead of an elevator ride distant; or if beyond that, easy enough, until equilibrium is restored, to get lost for awhile in the streets of Charleston.

Getting lost for awhile is pretty much a standard part of Charleston, as integral as anything else is to the ongoing success of the Conference. While Charleston now is slightly drier than in years past, dress is still sufficiently casual that most of us can hide our name badge and expect to pass on the street as a regular tourist or businessperson and not appear quite so obviously a creature of the convention zone, a sensation hard to shake in the larger host cities. (Attendees who always carry the conference bag, obtained as a giveaway at registration, are exceptions.) Getting away from the usual routine is why we have conventions at all; but getting away from the routines of a convention is a learned skill — more easily learned in Charleston than anywhere else — and one essential in achieving the peak conference experience.

You’ll hear newcomers say, “Everybody here knows other people” (not a remark you’d hear at an actually large conference). At Charleston many attendees do know one another, it’s true. They’re from the same library or company, the same state or province (Canadians attend Charleston in good number; as do Brits, especially among the vendors and publishers), have worked together somewhere, have served on the same ALA or other committee, have a vendor-customer or publisher-vendor relationship, or for some other reason are not strangers. It’s a reason to come to Charleston. You will see people you know and like. You will stand in a circle at the breaks and talk to them. Or, skip a session clean and talk to them.

For the Charleston newcomer all this public conversation can be intimidating. Why am I the only one here, it’s natural to conclude, doing nothing but listening to speakers? The complaint begins as a thought. Then it’s a verbal grievance expressed to someone in conversation. After that, conversation moves to a different topic. Then others join

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Bet You Missed It

Press Clippings — In the News — Carefully Selected by Your Crack Staff of News Sleuths

Column Editor: Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Editor’s Note: Hey, are y’all reading this? If you know of an article that should be called to Against the Grain’s attention ... send an email to <ksstrauch@comcast.net>. We’re listening! — KS

IF YOU’RE INSECURE, NITPICK
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

C. Northcote Parkinson wrote, “The No Man has little to lose.” Hence it’s a safe harbor for gutless and domineering managers. Of course they pretend to be perfectionists protecting lofty standards that only they can see.

But the real impact is enormous inefficiency. It’s not just the wasted time of doing things over and over before the boss gives approval because it’s now totally his idea. Productivity is reduced to a crawl. First the abused staff will spend an inordinate amount of time trying to overcome objections in advance. But with ‘no’ still the answer the staff learns that trying hard doesn’t matter because nothing whatsoever pleases.


MALAISE AT A FORMER HIGH FLYER
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

The “Peanut Butter Manifesto” is being circulated at Yahoo, a memo saying the company is spread too thin and even (from online dating to fantasy sports to weather) and calling for a wake up. The company suffers from slumping sales, slow revenue growth, talent defection and no particular focus.

Some Yahoo management argue that refusal to buy Facebook and YouTube is a sign of discipline. But a buyer of Yahoo advertising says Yahoo had the ability to do the Facebook/YouTube stuff faster and bigger than anyone else and flubbed it. Meanwhile Yahoo plunked down $2 billion to build a search and advertising business and yet they’re being trounced by Google.


IDLE MINDS IN CYBERSPACE
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

A post-modern economy finds it easy to produce solid objects answering real human needs. So it devotes its energies to elaborate fictions pandering to the public appetite for unreality. The university is big business in America and plays a key role.

While universities contain departments of “useful arts,” its dominant courses of study in the humanities are dedicated to uselessness and “remains fixed on that strange thing called scholarship, the utility of which has been neither definitively proven nor finally disproved.” America produces more scholarship than the rest of the world combined.

Knowledge is used to make more knowledge, much unreadable, most unread. Gender studies and queer studies do not exist for ideological reasons but to provide new fields for journals, books and footnotes. “A modern university could be compared to an ant-heap, in which the library is queen, her swollen body constantly enlarged by the fertile scholars that cling to her, and surrounded and protected by the sterile bands of student soldiers.”

Information technology, rather than making this “knowledge explosion” more accessible has drowned out understanding with noise. It treats reality and fantasy as equivalent.