

Members Talk—MTA Listens: The Annual Conference

by Kristi R. Hanson

- The MTA conference is valuable to the M community.
- Partnership with a major computer trade show is a good idea.
- Seeing what's new in M, M problem-solving, and seeing M and other technologies in one setting, are all highly valued conference elements.
- Interfacing/connectivity and the Internet are the hottest topics for 1997.

This is what 1996 conference attendees are saying in the 1996 conference evaluations.

The evaluations also produced numerous constructive suggestions for improving the conference. Participants asked for higher quality throughout the sessions—more professional presentations and handouts; more networking and information exchange opportunities; and a stronger sense of identity and community.

Responses to a separate 1997 conference survey are confirming both the need for an annual conference and very strong interest in interfacing and Internet topics.

1997 Conference Planning

In preparation for next year's conference, MTA is listening very closely to what M community members say they value. Both the '96 conference evaluation and the '97 conference survey have provided an opportunity for people to specify what's important to them. We're seeking the full range of perspectives: from employers and employees; from users, developers, and vendors. MTA staff and the 1997 Conference Steering Committee are carefully reviewing these recommendations as we build next year's conference program.

MTA recognizes that the needs of M community members are clearly changing and the association must evolve accordingly. Holding the 1996 Conference with Database & Client/Server World was a radical change and experiment intended to meet these changing needs. The goal

was to simultaneously instruct about M's relationship with other technologies and broaden awareness of M Technology's ever-growing capabilities. All indications are that this goal was attained — and is a worthy target for next year's conference as well!

MTA is now working toward a 1997 conference that is even more finely attuned to members' professional interests and to the trade show partnership setting. The Conference is scheduled for the same venue—the Hynes Convention Center in Boston, alongside Database & Client/Server World's conference and expo, May 18-22. The Board-appointed Steering Committee members—Susan O'Gorman (KHP Services), chair, Gail Penrod (AMS), Rick Sulzer (KB Systems) and Gardner Trask (Integrated Healthcare Solutions) — are developing a program that will offer the technical information and networking opportunities that the M community wants.

1996 Conference Evaluation

A solid base of 107 conference participants (26% of the 414 registrants) returned evaluations to MTA, answering 33 questions about the effectiveness of various conference elements and changes desired for the 1997 conference. Readers who would like more detailed information beyond the summary below are invited to contact MTA.

Value of Conference

Almost all evaluation respondents (96%) assessed the conference as worthwhile. Why? "There is no other venue for such one-stop shopping . . ." It's a "single, international forum of M users, vendors, and developers. Useful for sales and recruiting efforts." They viewed the conference as ". . . an excellent opportunity to gather and share ideas. . ." as well as to ". . . network and see directions other sites are going." They told us that "It's crucial to bring the active users together for face-to-face discussions" and that it "holds the M community together." One attendee said she "never knew so many M technologies existed." Many cited the importance of getting updated: "The industry changes rapidly; it's necessary to stay on top of what's

happening." Some noted that the conference helps M keep competitive: The conference "gives the community critical mass against other technologies. . ." and "This is an emerging technology with some 'ancient' roots. We need the community to energize and focus."

Not everyone agreed, however. The few dissenters offered such comments as ". . .things have evolved to a point where use of M will be limited" and "M is having trouble keeping pace with the rest of the computing industry."

Partnership with Database & Client/Server World

Attendees selected the combination with Database & Client/Server World (DB & C/SW) more frequently than any other single factor as the primary reason for attending the conference and a large majority said the partnership was of value. Participants commented that "Being part of DB & C/SW was a positive move," "I need to consolidate my travel whenever possible." They liked the "broader, larger audience," and "the presentation of M alongside other database technologies."

Keynote Speaker and Site Visit: *M at Brigham & Women's Hospital*

Keynote speaker John Glaser's presentation on Brigham & Women's Hospital's huge M-based migration to client/server was a big hit. Unfortunately only 43% of the respondents attended, and all but one of those who heard it liked it, offering such comments as: "excellent speaker," "no-nonsense, hard-headed look at M," "fascinating!", "encouraging to see M succeed in such a large enterprise," "inspiring," "a real showpiece for M," "a world-class, highly effective M implementation," "relevant, witty, and useful." The one respondent who didn't like the speech objected to "too many statistics" and so "left early." Although not asked specifically about the site visit to Brigham & Women's, some respondents indicated that was their favorite element of the conference, and MTA heard many verbal accolades after the visit.

Program Content

The evaluations yielded mixed signals about the quality and value of program content. About half of the respondents said this was what they liked best about the conference, citing "quality of the sessions," "caliber of the instructors," and "intelligent learning experiences" as favored elements. The tutorials and discussion sessions were overall rated highly by conference attendees, yet almost 17% said this is what they liked least.

Most respondents indicated that tutorials met their professional needs, but tutorials ranked least important when compared with learning what's new in M, M Technology problem-solving, and seeing M and other technologies in one setting. They rated discussion sessions very highly as a good environment for idea and information exchange, but asked for more professionalism and variety, more audience participation, and more consistency in quality: "Some are excellent . . . others are pretty bad."

1997 Conference Survey

In addition to the evaluations from '96 conference attendees, MTA sought input informally from the M community and formally via the 1997 conference survey (published in the last two issues of *M Computing*; online on MTA's home page and on the M newsgroup <comp.lang.mumps>). While at this writing it is too soon to draw conclusions, some commonalities are emerging. Most respondents to date are planning to, or hope to, attend next year. Cost remains a factor in the decision to attend. And interfacing, the Internet, and client/server lead the list of topics critical to M users.

Get Involved!

Readers interested in volunteering to help plan or implement the conference, and those interested in participating as session presenters and/or sponsors, are encouraged to contact Steering Committee Chair Susan O'Gorman at 717-730-5809, or MTA at 301-431-4070 (email MTA1994@aol.com). For conference and other M Technology information as it develops, visit MTA's web site at <http://members.aol.com/mta1994/mta.htm> and watch your snail mail for *MTA Updates*. **M**

Kristi Hanson has been an MTA staff member since 1992. She was the unofficial program chair for the 1996 Conference Steering Committee and is working closely with the 1997 Steering Committee.

The 1997 MTA Annual Conference

May 18-22, 1997
at the Hynes Convention Center
in Boston

in Conjunction with
Database and Client/Server World