

MTA 97 - A Look Back

by Gardner S. Trask III

Well, its been a couple of months since the 1997 MTA meeting in Boston, and I have finally stepped out of the decompression chamber and debriefed enough so as to look back without breaking into a cold sweat.

Shortly after the May meeting closed, I was approached by Kristi Hanson of the MTA to do a follow-up article, but I felt at that time I was just too close to the subject to reflect properly. As a member of the Steering Committee, I did not want to do a quick turn-around cheerleading piece. I wanted to reflect and also to get some feedback from others participants before passing judgment.

I have been attending these meetings off and on for close to ten years now. To some that's a lifetime, to others just a drop in the bucket. And for the past several years the "Imminent Death of MTA" has been predicted almost as much as the "Imminent Death of the Internet." It is no secret that membership in the MTA has been in decline and that meeting attendance has faltered, and each year seems to bring us closer to some precipice. Each year we hear that "this year will be pivotal."

Well this year, prophesied as "pivotal" or not, I saw a huge turnaround in spirit and attitude concerning the MTA annual meeting.

Held for the second year in Boston, in conjunction with the DCI Database & Client/Server World Expo, this year's MTA attendance exceeded 300 participants. This was in spite of the unfortunate timing of a VA conference that same week which 'stole away' many of our 'regular' attendees. But it was not the attendance that boosted the feeling of the meeting.

Social events:

One of the changes proposed this year by the steering committee was too re-established more group identity for the M'sters. Many felt last year that being spread out on the Expo floor broke up the feeling of M Community

and camaraderie. This year, activities focused around a central location in the "Solutions Center." Coffee breaks, snack breaks, and between-event get-togethers, that all focused on one particular spot, created a sense of "belonging" that builds strong relationships.



From left: Don Gall, MTA Executive Director, Susan O'Gorman, Steering Committee Chair, Ed Saulnier, Keynote Speaker.

And, as usual, the social activities planned by MTA and the steering committee went a long way toward bringing people together. The "First-timers" party, the MTA Welcome reception, impromptu group dinners, the Interneters' dinner, and other activities all provided ample time and opportunity to get out and about in Boston with your "M" pals and peers.

Solutions Center:

Another innovation this year was the Solutions Center. Based on comments from last year, coupled with the cost and non-unified layout of the exhibition hall, the steering committee formed this experimental venue. The Solutions Center was designed to fill the gap for vendors

unable to or undecided about presenting in the huge DCI hall. It was also designed to level the playing field between those vendors with deep pockets and those with modest advertising budgets. By design, vendors were provided with a simple eight foot table. No booth's or wall signs were allowed. The emphasis was on substance, not "selling." And it worked very well. Open for most of the conference, the Solutions Center was constantly buzzing with MTA participants. Of particular note were the many companies looking for M professionals. These included Henry Elliott, IDX, Partners Healthcare, and Kaiser Permanente. A strong indicator indeed of the growing M job market.

Technical Program:

This year, the Steering Committee and MTA Board of Directors set a strong direction of improving the technical offerings for tutorials and discussion sessions. I, and my discussion and tutorial teams were given a mandate to "think out of the box" when soliciting speakers for the meeting. Hot topics included (in relation to M, of course) the Internet, GUI, browser, and Java technologies. We also re-introduced the hands-on tutorials by providing off-site computer centers for instructors.

Trying not to sound conceited, I would like to say that I am very proud of the job the teams did in bringing a vast amount of knowledge and expertise to a widely varied and technically interesting program. From my perspective, the tutorials and discussion sessions are a major draw, and I am very pleased with what was offered this past May.

So, even after the euphoria of the week has passed, even after the din has died down, I still reflect on a fun, informative, and interesting meeting. I am personally very proud to have been a part of this MTA. I think it has reinvigorated the M community and helped MTA "turn the corner." The change in attitude and morale from the day before the conference, to the day after, was palpable. There was something new and exciting in the air, and I look forward to next year with renewed enthusiasm. **M**

As the "technical content" member of the 1997 Conference Steering Committee, Gardner Trask was responsible for attracting presenters on cutting edge issues. He is a senior programmer/analyst with Eclipsys Corporation in Boston.

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	Cover 4
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