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Editorial Director

Gary Breed

gary@highfrequencyelectronics.com

Tel: 608-437-9800

Fax: 608-437-9801

Publisher

Scott Spencer

scott@highfrequencyelectronics.com

Tel: 603-472-8261

Fax: 603-471-0716

Associate Publisher

Tim Burkhard

tim@highfrequencyelectronics.com

Tel: 707-544-9977

Fax: 707-544-9375

Associate Editor

Katie Landmark

katie@highfrequencyelectronics.com

Tel: 608-437-9800

Fax: 608-437-9801

Business Office

High Frequency Electronics

7 Colby Court, Suite 7-436

Bedford, NH 03110

Editorial and Production Office

High Frequency Electronics

104 S. Grove Street

Mount Horeb, WI 53572

Also Published Online at

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Subscription Services

Sue Ackerman

Tel: 651-292-0629

Fax: 651-292-1517

[circulation@highfrequencyelectronics.com](mailto:circulation@highfrequencyelectronics.com)

Send subscription inquiries and address changes to the above contact person. You may send them by mail to:

High Frequency Electronics

PO Box 10621

Bedford, NH 03110-0621



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# New Ideas Grow from In-Person Interaction at Conferences

**Gary Breed**  
**Editorial Director**



Associate Editor Katie Landmark was the main host in our booth at the recent IMS 2010 Conference & Exhibition.

Technical conferences are a traditional venue for sharing ideas among engineers, scientists and educators. Although many traditions are being questioned in this era of instant electronic communications—downloaded journal papers, e-mail lists, online discussion groups—the “live” conference format has remained an important intellectual activity.

There are many good reasons for conferences to continue! In-person contact has advantages that cannot

be duplicated via any long-distance medium. My personal attendance usually includes Radio & Wireless Week, DesignCon, Wireless & Microwave Technology Conference, International Microwave Symposium and European Microwave Week. Although conference attendance ranges widely among these events (200 to 2500 persons), all of them share the same atmosphere of stimulating personal interaction. What makes up that atmosphere? Here are a few things:

Oral presentations usually reveal details and insights that are not included in the paper that is published in the Proceedings, which often has a limit on the number of pages. A good example is the LNA design article by Victor and Nath in this issue, which was awarded the “Best Student Paper” at WAMICON 2010. By adding the material used in the oral presentation, the result is nearly twice the length of the written submission for the Proceedings.

At a conference, you and other members of the audience get to ask questions—not only in the meeting room, but individually when you find the author after the session. Also, the authors always seem to add a few unplanned background remarks during their talks, which can reveal much about problems that arose during their work and how they were solved.

Interaction with others during social events or breaks between the various papers and workshops is the most valuable part of a conference for many attendees. Sometimes, finding an industry guru and getting the answer to one important question can make the entire trip worthwhile. Discussing problems with your peers in the relaxed environment of a recep-

tion or banquet dinner may help you realize that you are not alone in your frustration with a particular design, test or manufacturing problem. Even if you don't actually find the answer, you will certainly gain insights that will help.

Perhaps the most important result of in-person events is the development of long-term professional friendships. Peer-to-peer and mentoring relationships often develop as a result of meetings and conversations at conferences. You need these contacts—collaborating with colleagues is an essential part of your career, and conferences are a great place to meet new people that you might not find through work, local society chapters or online groups.

### **Get Involved!**

If you agree with most of these points about the value of confer-

ences, consider getting involved, not just attending. Of course, presenting a paper is part of the conference process, but many programs seem to be filled with graduate students fulfilling academic requirements, professors working toward tenure, plus a collection of industry leaders who present papers at many conferences.

The best conferences also have papers from working engineers, presenting project case histories that reveal some new aspect of design or implementation. These practical papers represent industry development work rather than academic research and add a lot to a conference's range of topics.

Conference committees need volunteers, too. At the beginning, you might volunteer to review papers in your area of expertise. You can help organize a session focused on a topic of interest. Or

you might simply make yourself available for any job that's needed and see what happens!

As you gain experience in the operation of conferences, a position on the Steering Committee is a worthy goal. Start with a position that fits your skills. I've served as Publications Chair, reviewed papers and chaired sessions. You might have skills to be Webmaster, or have the connections to organize high-quality workshops.

One last note—there is a clear connection between conference involvement and a successful career. Recently, I've noticed that many of the "conference regulars" I met 25 years ago are now senior management, corporate executives or successful entrepreneurs. Perhaps your own involvement will lead to the same result!

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