

Statement from Susan Oderwald, SPE's Executive Director The Direction of SPE

Introduction

SPE has experienced a dramatic transformation in the past few years that continues as the competitive environment for professional societies also change. This transformation is most evident in four areas.

(1) the expanded use of partnerships and outsourcing; (2) continual introduction of new and improved member benefits; (3) continued investment in online technologies; and (4) anticipation and reaction to the demands of serving a globalized industry.

Expanding Use of Partnerships and Outsourcing

SPE is a small, \$6 million business operating on a global scale. It has neither deep pockets nor unlimited expertise. In the past, professional societies focused staff and operations on activities such as publishing, events, and board management, while depending solely on volunteer resources for technical content. To a large degree, professional societies competed with each other and not with major for-profit corporations.

Today's reality is different.

Today, SPE competes far more with global publishing houses and other online information providers, many of which have superior resources and global infrastructures. This is especially true in publishing and large-event management activities like ANTEC.

SPE has had to dramatically change how it does business. The use of partnership and outsourcing (sometimes both at the same time) has become a key element of almost every activity within the Society.

ANTEC is a good example. As you know, last year and this year, SPE has partnered with *Plastics News* to co-locate *PlasticsEncounter@ANTEC*. In 2009, SPE will partner with the Society of the Plastics Industry, SPI, to produce ANTEC as part of NPE 2009. These partnerships have certainly produced positive and more consistent financial results for the Society, but the driving force behind them is to provide greater participation in SPE by a broader technical audience.

SPE's journals are an excellent example of how a strategic partnership is superior to our previous stand-alone way of doing business. SPE's journals have been co-published with Wiley InterScience for roughly the past 5 years. Under that arrangement, the profitability of the journals has increased by more than 300%. But more important, readership, online availability, and the citing of SPE's journals by other scholars have all seen substantial increases as well. SPE's journals are better positioned in the academic community, and more prestigious as a result of our working with a \$4 billion global publisher.

Starting in 2008, a similar arrangement for SPE's magazine, *Plastics Engineering*, has begun with Wiley. Co-producing ANTEC, co-publishing our technical volumes: these are just two of the ways SPE has

begun expanding partnerships. There are more. In fact, it has become the exception, instead of the rule, that SPE directly produces any major member benefit or activity without the use of partnering or strategic outsourcing.

As a result, over the past six years, SPE's staff has seen a radical transformation in size, job descriptions, and basic activities. In-house staff size has contracted by almost half (from 42 employees in 2001 to roughly 25 by the end of 2008), but the number of partnerships and outsourcing relationships has increased by a factor of 5. This has been driven more by a need for better expertise and global infrastructure than by any specific financial reason, although the outcomes have been equally as important in stabilizing SPE's financial situation.

New Member Benefits

In addition to drastic changes in the way SPE conducts business, we have had to do more for our members and in very different ways than we did just five years ago. The SPE website has become the central medium through which members derive value from SPE. SPE's online technical library, online access to SPE's technical journals, and SPE's online member directory are the most valued benefits, according to SPE surveys. Conferencing and seminars are also highly rated, but have been eclipsed by online benefits. In addition, almost all benefits that members identify as most valued are also highly technical. Networking and other important value propositions that SPE has traditionally provided are still relevant, but only in the context of delivering technical information.

In 2008-2009, SPE will be adding more technical benefits and content online. One key example is that for the first time, SPE's entire library of journal articles from *Polymer Engineering & Science* and *Polymer Composites*, some of which go back almost 50 years, will be available to SPE members for free from Wiley InterScience. This comprehensive archive of technical literature will round out SPE's online technical library of ANTEC papers since 1998, providing members with one of the most comprehensive resources for plastics research available in the world. ALL of this is included with their membership fees.

Web 2.0 and Beyond

SPE is only scratching the surface with today's website. Over the next few years, SPE will be adding a variety of online collaboration and publishing tools through which members can meet, confer and collaborate with one another online. Scientists and engineers around the world are experimenting with how these technologies can best serve the scientific community and the public, and standard protocols for how preliminary scientific findings are posted, shared and consumed on the web are very much in a developmental phase. SPE is monitoring these trends closely, and will likely be offering, in the near future, some beta opportunities for members to collaborate online within the confines of the SPE community. Use of blogs, podcasts and other methods of delivering and discussing technical information is also being initially offered and evaluated.

What sets SPE apart from other online suppliers of technical content for plastics is that SPE wants to ensure that its online tools and protocols are consistent with our core values as a professional Society. These state that our activities:

- Embrace the principles of sound science, which includes open publishing and review of scientific advancements and results. And,

- Respect intellectual property and uphold practices that protect individuals and companies from commercial infringement or constraint.

SPE is investing over \$300,000 over the 2008-2010 period specifically to bring our website, database and other information technology infrastructures to a new level of service for our membership.

Impact of a Globalized Industry on the Society

A globalized industry means that technical innovations, research & development and technical expertise will continue to see broader and broader distribution around the world. China, India and the Middle East will provide especially fertile ground for technical innovations in plastics materials, processing and markets. Robust traditional membership models for SPE may or may not be possible in many of these locations. Price, language and cultural barriers to group participation all have an impact on the way SPE operates around the globe.

What is essential for the industry, however, is that the technologies and innovations that are developed locally are vetted and applied globally. In fact, fewer and fewer technologies are derived locally, as engineers and scientists increasingly collaborate on a global scale. SPE has a central role in facilitating that process and in publishing and vetting scientific results.

Regardless of where or by what company technical innovations are initiated, the process of transparent scientific review is essential to protecting both the company and the general public from faulty claims, unsound practices and other unproductive advancements that potentially could create harm and damage the reputation of our industry.

To that end, as new localities for scientific R&D develop around the world, SPE must ensure that such research and innovation are held to the consistent standards of publishing and review. Additionally, if SPE is to remain the preferred medium through which technical information is communicated, SPE will need to conduct more and more activities in those areas where new technical activity is happening – regardless of membership numbers.

To that end, in addition to the U.S. and Europe, SPE has identified China, India, the Gulf States and Brazil as having particular interest, and SPE is actively seeking to produce more conferencing and attract journal publishing from these areas.

The State of SPE's Mission and Relevancy

In this global setting, scientific and technical exchange has become paramount in adding value to companies, and wealth to economies. The truth is that the plastics industry will contribute in a big way to solving some of the world's biggest problems. Technological innovations in plastics will be central to providing access to clean water, improving agriculture production, reducing waste and greenhouse gas emissions, saving energy and improving the quality and longevity of human life.

Such innovation and technological improvements don't happen without a strong, well-funded and motivated scientific and technical community, collaborating globally.

But any technical advances will suffer a diminished potential if the plastics industry – especially our scientific reputation – loses public credibility and trust.

SPE plays a central role in reviewing, publishing and distributing scientific and engineering innovations throughout the global plastics industry. Without more fervent support from companies and individuals for such activities, the industry runs the risk of losing public credibility. Activities such as ANTEC help maintain and improve our credibility by creating a more transparent opportunity for the vetting and distribution of new technologies within a system that works to protect the ownership of such advances.

In addition, demographic trends are creating a global demand for technical talent, upon which this industry depends. SPE actively promotes and supports technical personnel in ways that can attract and retain them within our industry. Furthermore, SPE provides companies with another way to involve and keep their best personnel active and engaged with their global colleagues. This is no longer a luxury or perk, but rather a fundamental necessity in creating a knowledge-based work environment.

In my view, SPE's role and mission have never been more relevant or needed by our industry. However, in the very competitive environment in which companies find themselves day-to-day, the longer-term nurturing of talent and technology often falls to the side. This is shortsighted and detrimental to the development of any company's competitive advantage. SPE needs to do more to reach out to companies and explain the importance of our mission to their competitiveness as companies and as an industry.

While the industry will continue to evolve and face challenges, SPE is excited to evolve with it, providing the necessary tools and events that help companies succeed. This is where you come in. While it is our challenge to reinforce our relevance to companies in the industry, I challenge you to come right along beside us and help us in this mission. You can have an impact, and I look forward to continuing our combined goal of being the premier source of technical information in this ever-changing global industry.

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