



ARC Field Report: NPRA's 2003 Computer Conference

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By Dick Hill

The recent National Petrochemical & Refiners Association (NPRA) annual computer conference, for the second straight year, used the hospitality suite approach for suppliers that wished to show their technology to the group of petrochemical and refining professionals.

Although the list of attendees has continued to dwindle from the heydays of the 80s and 90s, professionals attending found this intimate atmosphere useful. Only a few suppliers showed their dedication to this industry segment and this particular annual event through sponsorship of hospitality suites: AspenTech, Haverly/Tai-Ji, Honeywell, IndX Software, Invensys, Matrikon, OSIsoft, Siemens, and Umetrics.

Others such as Dash Optimization, Emerson Process Management, KBC advanced Technologies, Nexus, PAS, and Shell Global Solutions joined in to support end users and NPRA with presentations in various tracks over the course of the three day event.

In addition to the usual topics of APC, Optimization, Planning and Scheduling, there was increased interest in the topic of Visualization. Of course, the attendees were interested in the ways that all of these areas can be used to solve their very specific requirements. This is where the hospitality suite approach was most effective. It allowed suppliers to show not only existing technology, but advances that are not quite ready to show to everyone.

Of course, the session tracks allowed users and suppliers to talk about their experiences in Planning and Scheduling type of activities as well as APC and Optimization. In addition there were several discussions around software licensing, plant information management, IT management, abnormal situation and alarm management, and security issues.

My personal favorite was a new track devoted to "Out-of-the-Box" topics. This gave the opportunity for several discussions on topics that are not necessarily mainstream in the conservative petrochemical world.

With attendance down to only about 150, and about one in four being chemical or refining professionals, one might ask "what has happened?" Well for one thing, back in its heyday there were a lot more refiners. One only has to look at the names of operating companies that now attend (e.g. ChevronTexaco, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, Lyonell-Citgo, MarathonAshland, etc.) to understand the impact of consolidation in this industry.

Combine this with the ever-popular and now almost institutional budget constraints, and you have a formula for low attendance. Suppliers smile and say, "but the quality of attendees is high." And they were right! The attendees – from both suppliers and operating companies – were devoted professionals. The purpose was to exchange ideas about what works and new things that might help advance the industry in the future. Too bad more people could not have taken advantage of the wealth of knowledge of those that did attend.