

Topic:
User Conferences

User Conference Views

Views from CAD user groups on the benefits that suppliers can reap from user conferences

iCAD is produced by Business Advantage, a B2B research, business development and marketing consulting practice operating in the global IT, Digital and Telecommunication sectors.

On the face of it, user conferences should present real opportunities to the suppliers of the product or family of products under scrutiny. But with user groups often closely guarding their independent status, the organisers tend to call the shots and overt sales pitches are outlawed. So how much benefit can suppliers gain from these events? We asked representatives of the groups for users of Microstation, Mentor Graphics products and PTC products for their views. And, dedicated as ever to providing insights you can't get elsewhere, we answer the crucial question - just how far are UK CAD/CAM managers willing to travel to attend a user conference?

Vendors Welcome

So do delegates want vendors at user conferences? *"Definitely,"* says David Zar, President of the [International Mentor Graphics User Group](#). *"The events are user driven, but they would be useless if Mentor didn't participate. In our recent survey of members on what they want from their conferences, they rated interaction with Mentor customer support as equally important as networking with their peers."*

So vendors and other suppliers are welcome - but don't get too pushy! Nigel Davies, Chair of the [Microstation Community \(UK\)](#), explains: *"We have a few restrictions on resellers - we don't allow sales pitches for example. If they are presenting it has to be on the back of a case study with one of their customers. The feedback we've had recently is that people are fed up with sales pitches, both from resellers and software manufacturers. They've seen it all before. Show us something that's interesting, rather than just saying, this is what's coming in the product. One thing that annoys a lot of people is all these promises about what's coming in the future. Tell us what's available now. It's fine getting a bit of a future scoop, but these type of talks don't really help out with forward planning."*



Nigel Davies

Getting Close

All of the user group representatives we spoke to felt that suppliers need to get personal. *"I think vendors could extract more benefit from these events by taking the time to meet face-to-face with users,"* says Rick Snider, Executive Director of [Pro/USER](#). *"It isn't enough to simply provide information to attendees."*

David Zar comments on the range of people who attend Mentor Graphics User Conferences: *"Typically the people who go to the conference are a third CAD managers, a third actual designers who use the tools every day to get the work done, and a third of other management who are making the decisions on which tools they should buy. It's a great opportunity for Mentor. When an account manager goes into a large company they tend to talk to the high-level management team. The conference enables them to talk to the engineers who are actually using the tools."*

Experience Levels

Just over a third of our sample of managers with responsibility for CAD/CAM functions at 259 UK mechanical engineering sites have ever attended a CAD/CAM user conference. Not that we can take this as a measure of interest; not all user groups have European/UK branches, and conferences are not necessarily going to reach UK shores on a regular basis - so there may be a few burning ambitions unfulfilled among the two thirds who have not.

Areas of Interest

User conferences are as good an opportunity as any to take a check on the issues that are interesting/concerning customers. Have the user groups noticed much change in recent years in what delegates want to learn about and discuss? *"It goes in waves according to the stage that Mentor is at,"* says David Zar. *"For example about five years ago Mentor had a major release of its version 8 software. So the hot topics were new features, translating data, design flow and so on. Now that version 8 has been around a few years, the topics have shifted. Now it's more focused on how particular problems can be solved."*

The old favourites never die though, according to Nigel Davies. *"Delegates have always been interested in learning from their peers, e.g. how they've applied certain aspects of a technology to solve a certain problem. Also hints and tips - this is the single most popular presentation we can arrange - packed to the rafters every time."*

"We try and stay away from specialist topics as far as we can; if we arrange sessions on areas such as GIS systems or database programming, we tend to find that you get a handful of people attending who are very interested, but maybe 250 other people milling around wondering what to talk about. Keeping the topics generic is very difficult, but is important. CAD standards is another subject in which there's a huge amount of interest at the moment. This is particularly because the new version of Microstation is coming out and suddenly everyone is interested in updating their CAD standards; this is a topic that will feature heavily in our winter conference in January."

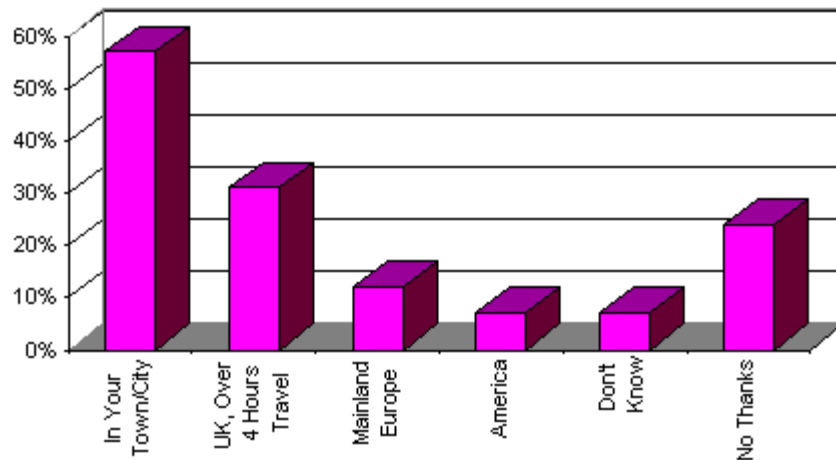
Speaking Notes

Looking at the wider range of conferences beyond just those organised by users, Nigel Davies feels that many presenters of keynote speeches have a lot to learn. *"The keynotes at conferences these days are generally rubbish - they are just sales pitches. I think we have a lot to learn generally about presentation from the Americans. The events we've attended in America have been so much better - the loud music, the whole feel that you're really at something special. Here, you get a little podium, and someone stands up and mumbles 'thanks, welcome, here's your first keynote'. We need some of that American dynamism."*

How Keen?

So, user conferences offer many benefits - but how many CAD/CAM managers are keen to attend one? And how far will they go? We asked our sample of managers at 259 mechanical engineering sites in the UK whether they would be interested in attending a user conference relevant to them if held in the US, mainland Europe, within four hours travel in the UK, or in their own town. The chart below tells the story.

Where Would You Consider Attending A User Conference?



It's surprising that as many as 7% said they would travel to the US, with only a further 5% prepared to venture into mainland Europe. A disappointing 57% said they'd attend a conference in their local town. This leaves 24% of managers who we assume wouldn't pop into a user conference if it were held in their own car park.

The Closing Ceremony

Whatever opportunity suppliers get to input at user conferences, it will never be as effective as having customers telling their peers that their products work. *"I think Bentley gets a huge amount from user conferences, because there are customers with no financial gain prepared to stand up and promote their products,"* says Nigel Davies. Spreading the word back home is an important factor too, says Pro/USER's Rick Snider: *"We find that attendees often act as 'technology evangelists' within their organisations, so these events are a means for vendors to educate these key users about future product direction."*

If you want to maximise the attendance at a seminar or conference, our [event fulfilment services](#) can provide the solution.

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