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THE VALUE OF CHAPTER CONFERENCE EVALUATIONS

by Louis J. Jerkich & Jeffrey N. Gatten

Introduction

The OLA Northeast Chapter's Spring Conference held at Kent State University on April 22, 1988 was larger in scope and attendance than the chapter's previous conferences. Twenty-nine programs were offered to 431 participants, compared with 340 participants in 1987. Increased attendance also meant an increase in the number of conference evaluation forms which were completed by the participants. Evaluation forms were completed by 190 persons, representing 44% of conference participants. The majority of the respondents were from public libraries (83%) or academic libraries (11%). This sizable sample of evaluations is large enough to permit some observations which may be pertinent to future conference planners.

The evaluation form asked participants to identify the programs which they attended and to evaluate both the speaker and the content of the presentation on the following scale: 1 (fair), 2 (satisfactory), 3 (good), 4 (very good) and 5 (excellent). Each participant was also provided space to write explanatory comments about the programs, the keynote and closing presentations, the conference location, the quality of lunch, and the quality of the overall conference program. In general, the overall program quality received high marks (29.1% excellent, 55.2% very good, 13.4% good, 2.3% satisfactory). These results mirrored the ratings of the individual programs, which predominantly were rated either as "very good" or "excellent" by the participants. A few other programs were given a rating of "good" by most of the respondents, but even these had more "very good" or "excellent" ratings than "fair" or "satisfactory" marks. Moreover, it was observed that some respondents readily evaluated the speaking abilities of the presenters, but apparently they did not feel competent enough to pass judgment on the content of the programs.

While ordinal ratings are convenient for broad assessments of the success or failure of a program, it was the respondents' written comments that were especially valuable and added clarity to the overall assessment of this chapter conference. Indeed, without the additional written comments, simple numerical statistics might be misleading. For example, a few high ratings for an otherwise

highly-criticized buffet luncheon are put in perspective when the comments reveal that these particular ratings are based on a visit to the local Wendy's. It was also discovered that the comments themselves could be misinterpreted if there were no numerical scores for comparison.

As the following examples will demonstrate, a successful evaluation form should have both a standard ordinal rating and allow space for open comments on each program or item being ranked.

Sample Evaluation Results

One program in which the speaker had high marks (61.5% excellent, 30.8% very good) serves as an example of how personal bias towards the topic can affect the rating of the content. Most participants gave a fairly high rating to the content of his program (39.1% excellent, 34.8% very good), but a few of those who did not remarked that the presenter was "good as a speaker but didn't agree with him at all," or the "speaker did the best he could with the topic," or the presentation was "too one-sided." Such comments deserve to be shared with and considered by the speaker. Fortunately (and typically), the comments were balanced by others stressing how the program was informative and well presented.

In contrast, other speakers were rated highly for their speaking abilities, yet ratings for content were noticeably lower. The associated comments often make clear that, rather than illustrating a personal bias, those who gave the low marks did so because the content was not what was anticipated from the program's title. Such comments might read "not what I expected," "badly described, too esoteric," or "of marginal interest to me."

Some respondents were hard graders. Speaker and content might both be given a rating of only "good," yet the comments may read "useful," "a fun, interesting perspective," "good coverage of subject," "had a lot of valuable information but no handouts," or "got more interesting as talk went along—am fired up..." Some of the highest praises came from participants who gave ratings of "very good," rather than "excellent," to speaker and/or content.

Because of such anomalies or because of strong contrasts between those who loved the program and those who hated it, it was valuable when reporting the

evaluation results to associate with each comment the same respondent's numerical ratings of the speaker and content. This pairing of numerical data with specific comments did elevate some seemingly negative remarks into constructive criticism. It also served to reinforce the validity of uniformly positive or negative comments and ratings. It is recommended that this approach be adopted by others who report the results of similar evaluations.

Perhaps nothing can better illustrate the real value of forming a marriage between numeric survey data and specific participant comments than the following "case study" from the 1988 OLA Northeast Chapter Conference.

A Case Study

Conference planners can never be sure how the audience will react to the scheduled programs or speakers. In planning the 1988 Northeast Chapter conference the NE Action Council took what was considered to be a bold step by inviting Cal Thomas to be the keynote speaker. Mr. Thomas, author of seven books, has been described as a radical conservative. He is a nationally syndicated columnist who was a regular commentator on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." He has also appeared as guest or host on several television programs. The publicity for the conference observed that "the former Moral Majority spokesperson's appearance at Northeast's Chapter Conference is certain to create excitement and controversy."¹ It was thought that it would be useful for the conference participants to hear a presentation different from the usual fare. A figure who would challenge our attitudes and stimulate the listeners to take a personal stand on an issue was desired.

It is well documented that the subject of censorship is of great interest to librarians.² In his keynote address, titled "None Dare Call it Censorship," Cal Thomas emphasized how the modern secular society makes it difficult for politically and religiously conservative viewpoints to reach "the shelves of libraries and bookstores and the pages of public school textbooks."³ He argued that we librarians who are so outspoken about freedom of information should be making a far greater attempt to make conservative viewpoints as available to our patrons as we make liberal viewpoints.⁴

TABLE I: RATING OF KEYNOTE SPEAKER (CAL THOMAS)

VALUE LABEL	PERCENT	CUM. PERCENT
Fair	.6	.6
Satisfactory	.5	1.1
Good	9.0	10.1
Very Good	32.0	42.1
Excellent	57.9	100.0
	100.0	

Mean = 4.461 Standard Deviation = .730 Valid Cases = 178

TABLE II: RATING OF KEYNOTE ADDRESS (CONTENT)

VALUE LABEL	PERCENT	CUM. PERCENT
Satisfactory	5.2	5.2
Good	13.9	19.1
Very Good	41.0	60.1
Excellent	39.9	100.0
	100.0	

Mean = 4.156 Standard Deviation = .852 Valid Cases = 173

When Cal Thomas concluded his address, the audience burst into vivid applause. It was immediately clear from the overall enthusiasm of the listeners that Mr. Thomas had been well received. The extreme degree to which the audience concurred with his views was made evident through the evaluation forms. Cal Thomas was perceived to be one of the best speakers of the day (Table I) and almost 81% of the listeners felt that the content was excellent or very good (Table II). Many of the comments were quite revealing, as the following excerpts demonstrate:

"Glad to see a radical conservative as a keynote speaker—would like to hear more of this viewpoint." (speaker excellent, content excellent)

"Generally pleased—felt Cal Thomas was interesting." (speaker very good, content very good)

"My thoughts exactly—felt like cheering." (speaker excellent, content excellent)

"Cal Thomas was an excellent lead-off speaker—very dynamic and its wonderful to hear another point of view." (speaker excellent, content excellent)

"Thomas—Interesting topic, well covered, knew material, gave good examples." (speaker very good, content good)

"I appreciate having Cal Thomas and the conservative viewpoint represented." (speaker excellent, content excellent)

"Would like more bio. infor. on Cal Thomas. Excellent keynote speaker—would have liked to address his issues in the breakout sessions." (speaker excellent, content very good)

"Keynote speaker best I've heard

here—entertaining, relevant stimulating." (speaker excellent, content excellent)

Of course, not all comments about Cal Thomas were favorable. One participant who rated Mr. Thomas's speaking abilities as "excellent" and the content of his address as "satisfactory" felt that "Cal Thomas is one-dimensionally over-simplified, but it does us good to hear this sort of thing from time to time." A few others felt that he did not address his topic as well as he might have and that it should have been more tightly focused on the needs of librarians, but these negative remarks represented a minority of the comments.

Prior to the conference, adverse criticism was expected in regard to Mr. Thomas's speech because he was to be an avid "conservative" among a more generally "liberal" audience. Clearly the NE Action Council was not prepared for so much enthusiasm and praise. It was the evaluation form that provided some startling insights to commonly held perceptions about librarians. Even a cursory glance at the ratings and comments about Mr. Thomas makes it clear that there are many librarians and library staff who share his conservative bent or at least are very open-minded toward the issues and philosophy he raised. One respondent, who considered both the speaker and content to be "excellent," summed up the conference in this way, "Cal Thomas alone was worth the registration fee! I did not agree entirely with his comments but it was the single most thought-provoking and challenging talk of any professional workshop I've attended, and I've attended quite a few in several fields."

Conclusion

The experience of the Northeast Chapter 1988 Conference is relevant to all library conference planners. Audiences do want variety, and they are diverse enough in political and religious convictions to merit greater attention to exploiting that diversity. We need not hesitate to stimulate controversy. Moreover, well-chosen speakers with a national reputation, combined with a wide variety of program offerings, may draw large enough crowds to pay for the added cost of a prominent speaker.

It would not be possible to make such broadly sweeping claims if it were not for the structure of the evaluation form employed. Certainly the authors of this article do not take credit for inventing this type of evaluation form. However, the method used in analyzing the collected data proved to be successful to the extent of permitting precise statements about success and failure. There is much to be gained by making sure that the evaluation form includes both numerical ratings and comments. Especially important is the pairing of the ratings with the comments for analysis, so that a comprehensive perspective can be obtained. What appears to be a negative comment may be constructive criticism when paired with high ratings. Likewise what appears to be a successful program can be quantitatively and qualitatively affirmed through the evaluations. A good evaluation form to which attention and effort is given to the collected data will allow conference planners to reach definitive conclusions, learn from mistakes, and expand the potential quality of future conferences.

Notes

1. "All Things Considered' Commentator to Speak at Northeast Chapter Conference." *Ohio Libraries* 1 (Jan/Feb 1988):24.
2. Serebnick, Judith. "A Review of Research Related to Censorship in Libraries." *Library Research* 1 (Summer 1979):95-118.
3. *Ohio Libraries* 1 (Jan/Feb 1988):24.
4. For a discussion of the demographics of censorship, see: White, Howard D. "Majorities for Censorship." *Library Journal* 111 (July 1986):31-38.

(Lou Jerkich and Jeff Gatten were members of the 1987/88 NE Chapter Action Council. Jerkich is the head reference librarian for the Geauga County Public Library's Chardon Library. Gatten is the systems librarian for the Kent State University Libraries.)