The path forward...

SSA Conference Recommendations

Based on Conference Survey Conclusions

April 16, 2011
Date: April 16, 2011

To: Mr. Al Tyler – Chairman, SSA Board of Directors

From: Bob Lacovara, Chairman – Conference Survey Committee

Re: SSA Conference – The Path Forward: Recommendations to the Board of Directors

Addressing the Major Questions:

The conference survey has yielded a solid statistical sampling of the soaring community. These data and statistical outcomes are highly representative of SSA members at large.

1. **The survey clearly indicates a desire for a full convention every two-years**

   Rational:
   a. The soaring technology progresses on about a 5-year cycle for equipment and a 10-year cycle for sailplanes
   b. The potential range of topics is limited within known parameters and the pool of expert-level speakers/accomplished presenters is fairly small
   c. From a content perspective there is simply not enough to see or discuss on an annual basis
   d. The desire for annual social contact as a driver was not widely supported
   e. A biennial conference will develop more interest and profit than an annual event
      i. People will be less likely to miss a conference because they will have to wait two-years for the next event
      ii. Better manpower yield and higher profit potential from an organizational perspective

   ➔ **Recommendation:**
   Schedule a full conference every other year.

2. **The survey clearly indicates a lack of interest in a national off-year event**

   Rational:
   a. There was only minority support for an off-year national level event without displays of sailplanes
   b. An off-year national “conference” event does not provide the combination of elements to draw a critical mass of attendees
   c. An off-year event will dilute the biennial major conference causing neither to be successful

   ➔ **Recommendation:**
   Do not hold an off-year “conference” without displays, or in some other truncated configuration

3. **Location-Location-Location is the major issue articulated in extensive comments.** The survey data and comments clearly indicate the following:
   - A different location each year
   - Must be a good weather location (Southern tier)
   - Must be a location with attractions (Vacation area)
   - Must be a first-tier airline destination (Direct flights)
Rational:

a. The principles of locating a winter season national event:
   i. Must be a good weather climate
   ii. Must be a place where people want to go for leisure, i.e., a vacation spot, somewhere to get away from winter weather
   iii. Must be family friendly with attractions to facilitate the above
   iv. Must have the appropriate convention/housing facilities
   v. Must have good airline access – First tier direct flights from hubs and reasonable airfares

b. The US Locations meeting the above criteria are:
   i. Orlando area
   ii. Tampa area
   iii. Ft. Lauderdale
   iv. San Antonio
   v. Albuquerque
   vi. Phoenix area
   vii. San Diego
   viii. Los Angeles area
   ix. Las Vegas
   x. Maybe Reno (not warm weather, but otherwise attractive)

→Recommendation:
Always hold the biennial conference in a southern-tier location with vacation appeal and good air access. Do not allow the potential of sponsoring clubs to drive the location selection (This has been the major cause of unappealing locations and many weather difficulties in the past). Rotate between the cities listed above based on convention facility availability and deals.

4. Twice as many attendees are interested in the SSA general education sessions as in the OSTIV technical sessions

Rational:

a. In the formation of past convention programs the general education sessions and the OSTIV sessions have been given equal weight and session time
b. The OSTIV sessions may be diluting the more desired general education sessions in terms of attendee perception of the overall convention program
c. The positioning of the OSTIV program in conjunction with the SSA program needs to be examined

→Recommendation:
There should be a clear delineation between SSA programming and OSTIV programming to increase attendee appeal. The OSTIV program should not have an equal 50/50 session distribution to the SSA program, but should entail approximately 33% of the overall conference program content. OSTIV should present true “technical” sessions only and eliminate the “fluff” of things like random safety opinion sessions thrown in at the last minute, or speakers asked to come up with a topic simply to pad the program.

The OSTIV sessions cannot continue to be independently programmed in parallel to the SSA sessions. There has been a critical lack of coordination between OSTIV and SSA. This has created too many schedule overlaps, topic conflicts, deadline problems, and competition for speakers. The programming of the OSTIV sessions must come under the overall management of the Conference Director (OSTIV organizers must report to the Conference Program Director on the conference organizational chart).
Additional Recommendations:

5. Club sponsorship/management of the conference

There is some sentiment to re-capture the golden years of SSA Conferences where local clubs sponsored and managed the conference in a profit sharing arrangement. While this may have worked to some extent (inconsistently) in the past, it is not a workable concept in this day and age.

a. The major problem with clubs assuming a significant role in the management and organization of a conference is that they are amateurs in arranging speakers, meeting planning and conference logistics.
   i. Every conference becomes a first time learning experience (Even if a club previously sponsored a conference they now new people)
   ii. Club personnel simply don’t have the experience history to know what works and what doesn’t work
   iii. The same mistakes resulting from inexperience are repeated on an ongoing basis when new organizers are involved each year. Conversely, the successes may not be carried over and built upon.
   iv. This scheme fits the maxim, “You can have 20-years of experience or 1-year of experience 20 times over.”

b. Consistent year to year professional management is required to allow conference organizers to build on successes and eliminate problems in a progressive manner.

Recommendation:
Clubs or local organizations should not manage the SSA Conference. The idea that organizing a conference is an opportunity for a local group is not conducive to long term success. They can assist on a volunteer basis, but the development of the topics, speakers, convention program, and convention logistics must be handled by professional conference organizers to be consistently successful.

A conference professional and certified meeting planners (CMP) should be employed to manage the conference. The SSA Staff are wonderful, hard working people who do a great job for the organization… but they are not specialized professional meeting planners. A professional meeting planner has organized hundreds, if not thousands, of meetings and deals on a daily basis with the myriad of details that make or break a convention. In addition, a professional will have personal relationships within the convention services industry and with venue executives. These relationships are the key to overall profitability in the final outcome.

The recommendation is to hire professional organizers to manage the biennial conference, forming a team with SSA Staff, and using member volunteers for onsite work.

6. In the conference off-year develop a national SSA presence at regional events and/or partner with current regional events.

Successful ongoing regional meetings currently occur without the direct involvement of SSA HQ. Some of these regional gatherings include: PASCO, Chicago, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and probably others. These meetings are driven by a desire to get together locally and could offer an opportunity for expanded SSA participation…assuming SSA can provide something of substance. SSA could have direct contact and reach more members with an official presence at regional meetings. However, SSA must provide something of value over and above what regional Directors can offer. Reports on SSA activities, plans, or contest related information are non-starters. There must be presentations of substance, delivered by the best experts to be
of value to the average pilot. Just promoting SSA or SSA activities at these regional meetings will not be helpful.

**Recommendation:**
Explore the possibility of partnering with local organizations in the convention “off-year” to participate on a national basis in regional events. SSA should develop expert level programming that has substance and is attractive to a broad range of pilots, i.e., subject matter that people want to hear.