

10 Tips

For a successful turning event

By Larry Genender

Whether you're organizing a turning event for 50 turners or 500, solid planning is the key to making the event successful for demonstrators and attendees.

The basic instructional unit in woodturning is a demonstration. Bring in an outside professional for a day, and you've birthed an all-day demo. The next step is a multi-day event—a genuine symposium.

SouthWest Association of Turners (SWAT)—the former “A Texas Turn or Two”—held its 13th annual symposium in early October. From its modest beginnings in 1992 as a backyard

event at Mark Potter's home in Columbus, this event grew to 538 attendees in 2004.

Our growth didn't happen overnight and it didn't happen without a group of dedicated volunteers. While SWAT might sound like a big-time event, remember that it has taken 13 years to grow it to its current size. We're pleased when attendees tell us that SWAT retains the warm and friendly feel of a local AAW chapter meeting.

Regardless of the size of your event, the 10 principles we follow may help you organize a successful woodturning symposium.



Above: After the “2-for-1” raffle, James Johnson presents his Chinese Varnish Tree platter won by Joanie Genender.



Right: Linda Salter's presentation included PowerPoint, wall charts, drawings, and live video.

1 Volunteers rule

Every group has a vast pool of volunteer talent that can provide expert leadership at no cost. The trick is to identify, motivate, and recruit that talent. Not every willing person is a leader, and not every turner capable of leadership will be willing and able to serve. We constantly recruit people with leadership skills who are willing to share those talents with the organization. Don't overlook the spouses of members, who may be willing to help organize your turning event.

2 Keep the costs down

For many of our attendees, SWAT is the only education event they can afford. To hold down our expenditures, we do two things. First, all tasks are volunteer (no one is paid). Second, we pay little, if anything for meeting facilities. We seek out venues owned by a city or county that recognizes the total economic benefit that the symposium attendees will bring to its community. For us, this means holding the symposium in mid-sized cities with convention facilities. Our basic three-day registration fee—unchanged for many years—is \$65, which includes a hot lunch on two days.

3 Non-profit corporation

If your organization hasn't already filed for tax-exempt status, there are tax advantages for doing so. SWAT is a non-profit Texas corporation (easy to do) with a 501(c)3 IRS tax exemption (more complicated, but still doable). This allows us to operate as an educational organization unencumbered by tax

The SouthWest Association of Turners (SWAT) will hold its 14th annual symposium Sept. 30 to Oct. 2 in Wichita Falls. For more details, see swaturners.com.

consequences. The AAW office has information available to get you started on this process, which can take six months or more for IRS approval. It's worth the effort.

4 Broad participation and governance

Think regionally, which will broaden your pool of volunteers and participants. SWAT is owned by 19 AAW chapters in Texas and Oklahoma. Chapter members feel that SWAT belongs to them and this promotes volunteerism and attendance.

The SWAT Board includes one director from each of the 17 Texas chapters and the two Oklahoma chapters. A four-member executive committee (EC), elected by the SWAT board, runs day-to-day operations. We try and reach decisions by consensus—not by potentially divisive votes. Our culture is to discuss everything until all of us agree. Any policy change or major financial outlay is discussed by the entire board.

The layer below the EC is our Leadership Group, comprised of people in charge of symposium operations, demonstrators, publicity, Instant Gallery, website, ladies' activities, and vendors. Each demonstration room has a sponsoring chapter that is responsible for support including audiovisual assistance, equipment setup, and cleanup.

Chapters are assigned to work the registration desk, the Instant Gallery, raffle ticket sales, local arrangements (including catering) and so forth. The underlying idea is to get many people involved, and divide tasks into manageable duties. That makes all volunteers feel that SWAT belongs to them (which it does).

5 Communication is vital

A smooth-running event relies on good planning. In January (10 months before our fall event), SWAT has an annual planning meeting. In addition, the EC communicates year-round, primarily by e-mail and phone. Nothing is decided by one person alone; every detail is discussed.

6 Everyone likes a party

The highlight of the weekend is our Saturday night banquet, which almost everyone attends. We start our "2-for-1" raffle at the banquet. About 30 of the top turners in the region and our lead demonstrators donate their art to a raffle, which is held at the banquet. In our experience, this is far superior to an auction, because everyone participates, and the main purpose of the banquet is to have fun—not raise money. The raffle continues at lunch on Sunday, where we give away three lathes and many other prizes. One raffle ticket gives you a chance both on Saturday and Sunday.

7 Don't forget the ladies!

We've learned that you can lift participation by making the woodturning weekend a family affair. Because most of the turners are men, we organize trips and events of interest for the partners who might be less interested in watching chips fly. And because many of the ladies are artists in other media, the women organized their own Instant Gallery this year with displays of everything from oil painting to needlepoint. It was a hit.

8 Demonstrators

We present both nationally known and local demonstrators. About one third of the demonstrations are by nationally known turners and two thirds by local and regional turners. This balance is what our attendees prefer and is within our budget. National demonstrators are booked at least 12 months in advance.

9 Vendors

Any time a group of woodturners gather, vendors want to display and sell their wares. The number of vendors has grown proportionally with attendance. This year, we had 29 vendors. We consider the vendors a symposium attraction and charge them only a nominal fee of \$150 for a 10x10-foot booth (includes four lunches).

10 Educational grants

Our objective is to operate at a break even level, but we've been fortunate to accumulate continued excess funds. In keeping with our charter as an educational organization, we have instituted an educational grant program to fund worthy chapter projects in our region.

Remember, while all the above sounds very "big time," the principles for success remain the same regardless of the size of your event. Start as small as you need to, and if you present a good show at a fair price, the woodturners will come.

Larry Genender (Lgenender@aol.com) is a retired general surgeon who now spends most of his time turning wood in Dallas, Texas. He is the immediate past chairman of SWAT.