

## NEWS

### Association Forum sets another annual meeting record

*"Rethink" theme provides Chicago-area executives with tools, ideas to reconsider approaches to solving industry challenges*

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By **Jerry Soverinsky**

CHICAGO—Proving that a convention center ballroom filled with C-level association executives against a backdrop of humid, 95-degree-plus temperatures is not restricted to the nation's capital, Chicago played host June 19 to the Association Forum of Chicagoland 2012 Annual Meeting, an attendance record-setting event.

At the McCormick Place venue, human resources manager-turned-poet Azure Antoinette provided keynote inspiration for the 559 attendees—12 percent more than last year's then-record. She opened with her poem "Humanity," commenting on the conflict of technological advancement with human contact.

"What happened to the days prior to Tivo?" she asked rhetorically. "Now I'd rather send you an update over Facebook."

She offered a wistful plea for a less restrained existence, "I give you my poetic word that I am dying to live again and just be, and that is an idea worth sharing."

So began the meeting, with an underlying theme of "rethink," a directive to consider new approaches for solving familiar challenges, a premise the meeting took to heart.

Moving beyond traditional one-way delivery of information, the Forum staged an interactive event. Each attendee was offered a smartphone-like gadget that allowed for posting real-time feedback to speakers. Also a microsite and smartphone app allowed attendees to vote on a preferred topic for the closing session on ethical dilemmas. The top three vote getters included how to respond to a slanderous article, what to do if an elected board officer is accused of illegal activity, and how to respond to pressure to enter a lucrative agreement.

#### A range of reasons to attend

For some, the Forum meeting was a chance to gain insights to take back to the workplace.

"I'm here to network with people and learn more about association management, along with marketing and public relations," said Christine Westendorf, media relations manager for the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology and a first-time attendee. "We do a lot with traditional media as well as social media, so I came for their educational sessions, to pick up some takeaways for digital marketing."

Still others approached the event as a chance to break away from day-to-day commitments while reconnecting with colleagues.

"For me, it's all about taking a day each year to sharpen my own saw," said Mark Thorsby, vice president of client management for association management firm SmithBucklin. "It doesn't matter to me who the speakers are; it's about meeting people and having an opportunity to think about my professional career."

General sessions were interspersed with dozens of educational breakouts as well as two brief—seven minute—"flash learning mob" periods on social media topics. Both of those were well attended, with more than 150 attendees learning about marketing in the age of social media and how to measure a mobile app's ROI.

Henry Givray, president and CEO of SmithBucklin, spoke to the lunchtime crowd on the topic of leadership, distinguishing it from management.

"Leadership is not the same as having authority," he said. "It is invited and can only be given willingly by others. It is revealed by what you inspire and what you enable."

As the event came to a close, poet Antoinette again took the stage with a closing assessment, summing up the "rethink" theme from her artist's perspective.

"I too forget to laugh," she said, "but here, in this Midwest place ... we can candidly talk openly about mistakes and fears and about what refreshes you and why."

"... You should know I don't always do well, either, but [what matters most is that we take things] moment to moment."