AHTD’s Fall Meeting 2016 Provided Nothing to Whine About

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Ok, a bad homonym was included in that headline in an attempt to be clever. While it failed miserably the Association For High Technology Distribution (AHTD) proved to be brilliantly successful in staging their Fall 2016 conference in Napa, California, the heart of “wine” country.

Held September 27-30 at the renowned Meritage Resort and Spa, the location, both physically and geographically, helped draw over 300 attendees, of which 60 were first timers, from all across North America and several European countries. Of course, virtually all would have come anyway because of the program and benefits of attending. But the prospects of good vino didn’t hurt the decision making process.

Seriously though, where the conference is held is merely a bonus. Most benefits could be realized if it was in an empty warehouse. For those not clear on the purpose, the AHTD works to increase the productivity, profitability, and market share of their Automation Solution Providers (ASPs), as well as the manufacturers that support them.

One huge way it does this is by putting on a twice yearly conference where distributors and manufacturers get together to discuss best operating practices and potential business opportunities, where highly regarded speakers convey expert knowledge on a variety of personal and professional development topics, and where old industry friendships are renewed and new relationships started.

While the nuts and bolts of the organization are taken care of by a management company, volunteer members themselves manage the policy and direction of the association.

The first official day opens early with the Board of Directors meetings. The main committees convene in the early afternoon. These operational committees include: Membership, Conference Program, Promotions/Communication, Spouse/Guest and the Manufacturer Advisory Council (MAC), all of which welcome new members.

The number one benefit members cite in surveys as to why they join and stay is the networking opportunities. AHTD hears that loud and clear and accommodates
accordingly. The first such opportunity is the First Timers Reception, which started at 5 PM sharp on the 27th.

Executive Director Leigha Schatzman started things off by introducing the Board of Directors to all members attending for the first time. The top officers shared a few remarks and advised that the most benefits of membership can be obtained by getting involved in committees and interacting with as many other members as possible.

The second networking opportunity immediately followed at 6 PM on another poolside terrace. This was the Welcome Reception for the general membership. And what a raucous reception it was! Friendships as well as business relationships are formed in this organization, with the semi annual meeting being the catalyst for keeping in touch. The view was great, the weather was mild, the food was delicious, and the conversation was compelling.

After a couple hours of flowing libations, and with a long day's journey behind them, many retired early to get rested up for the intensive program ahead. Of course there were also those who took advantage of the opportunity for further socializing.

On Wednesday morning the breakfast buffet opened at 7 am and there were already people huddled together having personal meetings. Whether pre-arranged or happenstance, it was a good idea to take advantage of any time available. This conference was the place to introduce and get introduced to new ideas and new people.

President of AHTD, Tom Swenton from Applied Automation Controls, opened the general session by reviewing the upcoming schedule and introducing once again the board members and committee chairs. He then introduced the first of many speakers, Chris Smith, who is a best selling author and co-founder of Curator.

Chris talked about the inevitability of the digital age regardless of whether you want things to stay the same. He also shared 10 business principles that focus on interacting with people. It’s really not B2B or B2C, folks. It’s P2P (people to people).

After a generous break (did I say something about networking opportunities?) David Robertson of the Wharton School reviewed a case study of the LEGO Company and how misguided innovation almost drove them to bankruptcy. They are now stronger than ever after realizing their error. With innovation the hottest of topics,
the lessons learned of how, when, and maybe when not, were enlightening and informative.

After a fulfilling lunch buffet on the veranda, three concurrent breakout sessions ran for 2 consecutive time slots. Although this meant you couldn’t catch all three, the topics were diverse enough that one may not have aligned well with your interests.

One session covered strategies to increase Website ROI. Alex Harris from Perficient Digital discussed how to analyze inbound traffic to determine the best course of action to improve conversions, primarily by testing and best practices. He covered both e-commerce sites and those trying to generate leads.

Mike Budde, along with Mike Jr., of Budde Marketing Systems discussed the strength of Reverse POS, where the manufacturer returns data to the distributor from submitted POS reports, all to better service the local territory. Trust seems to be the biggest hurdle but one that can be overcome when the channel partners truly partner up.

The third topic was about succession planning. With many high tech distributors privately held, maintaining value and direction when the present generation moves on is a touchy subject. Robert Wendover of Common Sense Enterprises took on the subject to help make the transition as seamless as possible.

Wednesday evening brought on the highlight of the event for the manufacturers, The Product Showcase & Reception. This was almost 3 hours of close encounters of the distribution kind, with the potential partners manufacturers most crave. 50 booths with table top displays showing the most up to date automation products and solutions were set up to educate, inform, and entice the distributor members. While the technology alone was likely enough to hold their attention the odds were upped a bit by weaving in tables of pasta, wraps, finger foods and other snacks, along with multiple carving stations and a couple open bars. It certainly kept everyone in the exhibit hall together for an extended period of time.

And if that didn’t provide enough chat time after a long day of joint breaks and meals, the President’s Reception followed shortly after the Showcase. This is where Tom Swenton and his wife open up their suite for another 3 hours of interaction. By this time of the evening business talk has been pushed aside and personal conversations take over.

No excuses for being tired were allowed Thursday morning as the schedule started again similar to the previous day. An early breakfast led to an 8 am review of the
day’s schedule, an announcement of the winners of the social media initiative and an introduction of the first speaker of the day.

Zoltan Hrotko of the David Allen Company discussed how to go about “Getting Things Done”. Based on a best selling book and organizational system he provided a workable and logical 5 step approach to getting more accomplished by paying more attention. He feels focus is the key driver for peak performance.

A 30 minute break followed which allowed time to re-fuel on caffeine in time for the next engaging session. Robert Stephens, the founder of the Geek Squad and chief technology officer at Best Buy for several years, talked about how he created and grew his company with ingenuity since he had no capital. Even when he “made” it he’d always consider frugal choices first and always tried to diverge from a competitor’s path. He felt a lack of resources actually fueled the innovation necessary to be different.

After Wednesday’s hectic schedule and 3 hours of mind bending in the morning, if felt right to take the rest of Thursday off. Well not exactly off. There were 3 choices on how to spend the afternoon. The first was the traditional golf outing. The second was a brief tour of the surrounding Meritage Vineyards along with an extensive 8 variety wine tasting. The 3rd was to truly be on your own to explore the Napa Valley. But all had to be back and ready to go by 5:30 later that day.

And why 5:30? That’s when the final gala banquet started. A cocktail hour transformed into a very special 4 course meal and wine tasting event. The Meritage Vintners teamed up with the house Master Chef to create a wonderful culinary experience.

And to work off some of the extra calories consumed a DJ started spinning tunes that quickly filled the dance floor and kept it full all night. There were still a few dozen patrons hanging on when the last song was played. It was an awesome ending to an awesome day.

One more treat was available for those staying through Friday morning. No, it wasn’t that breakfast started an hour later giving everyone an hour extra sleep. It
was the presentation of futurist Jim Carroll and his view on the Renaissance of Manufacturing that is taking place now.

It seems the only people bullish on manufacturing are the manufacturers themselves. They know the old jobs aren’t coming back, regardless what the politicians say. They are busy making new jobs. He shared trends that we should be aware of and finding ways to align with for future growth and success.

That was it for the 2016 Fall Meeting of the AHTD. With late September through October being grape harvest time in Napa Valley, the theme of “Harvest Opportunity” was as appropriate as it could possibly be. Developing relationships, gaining knowledge, and getting new perspectives, were all key takeaways from this season’s event. Be sure to attend the spring version for much more of the same.