

AMUG Conference Celebrates 30th Anniversary with Record Attendance

Photos capture some of what I saw at the event this year. As this event continues to grow, it will need to adapt in order to continue to fulfill its valuable and long-standing role of serving AM's users.



Blog Post: 4/16/2018

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The annual [Additive Manufacturing Users Group](#) (AMUG) Conference this year celebrated the event's 30th anniversary. The 2018 conference was held in Saint Louis, drawing a record 1,800 attendees, up about 13 percent from last year. One of the more charming details of the proceedings came just before a group of past presidents of the all-volunteer AMUG organization took to the stage to commemorate the anniversary. A photo was shown of the second installment of the conference, hosted by what was then called the 3D Systems Users Group. Why was the second conference shown instead of the first? Because no photo could be found of that first gathering. It is inherent to the nature of great successes that no one anticipates how great the success will be at the moment of its humble beginning.

Today, additive manufacturing has become so important, with this conference growing in importance along with it, that it was difficult to escape the feeling this year that the event has reached a crossroads. As those who are familiar with the AMUG Conference know, this is a distinctive event. It is an additive event and an industry event like no other. I doubt any other event routinely draws so many attendees possessing such extensive AM experience, and the decades of this event's history have done nothing to damp its organizers' energy and enthusiasm for catering to these attendees.

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3D-printed tooling keeps finding new applications. Impossible Objects shows this example: a soldering pallet for printed circuits. The Impossible Objects process allows AM from carbon fiber PEEK to create this tool within a day rather than waiting a week or more to obtain it via machining.

But continuing forward, can the distinctiveness of this event be preserved as it nevertheless adapts to meet the needs of the growing number of professionals and organizations who see AM as part of their future? In other words, is the users group ready to serve a dramatically expanding group of users?

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As a networking opportunity focused on additive, the AMUG Conference is unrivaled. This is chiefly because of the caliber of attendees, but that attendance is met by an event schedule combining generous and well-scheduled breaks throughout the day with catered events in the evening, providing plenty of opportunity to find and reconnect with associates. Plus, organized lunches with enforced random seating breed new connections. And a highlight of the event is the bussing of the attendees *en masse* to a destination that is a surprise each year for a special awards dinner and social evening. I mentioned the distinctiveness of this event? It comes from measures such as this last tradition in particular.

Yet as valuable as the connecting and reconnecting are, is this value the sole point or even the chief aim of the AMUG Conference? If this event's aim is also to inform and educate users of additive technology, particularly newer users, then I believe the conference stumbled this year.

Specifically, the inclusiveness of speakers and conference sessions produced a sprawling program that was all but impossible to navigate. That program consisted of various concurrent tracks of

speakers in the regular conference program joined by the major sponsors also giving presentations concurrently within rooms on the display floor dedicated to these companies. As a result, at various moments, this conference had more than 20 presentations occurring simultaneously—of varying quality, and of varying faithfulness to the promise made by the presentation's title and abstract in the conference program. As a result, many of the sessions, including most sessions I personally saw, were sparsely attended. This light attendance is a real problem, having an effect on the information itself. Anemic attendance leaves the audience member feeling the topic of the presentation is unimportant, and it leaves the presenter feeling as though time was poorly spent in preparing to teach the topic. Worse, the result of such a sprawling program is to leave every individual attendee missing almost all the conference's content as he or she struggles to pick just one narrow path out of conference sessions that sound promising. If any session chosen in this way then proves to be commercial in its orientation, or light on substance to an extent that is beneath the experience level of that attendee, then the sense of a lost opportunity is particularly great. In the networking interludes of this year's event, I heard attendee after attendee express their frustration about this difficulty with the conference program—its shortfall by confusing excess. The content of this conference would still have been full to the point of abundant, and it would have provided better service to AM users, if somehow it could have been limited to just the stronger 50 percent of this year's speakers. Even better still would be if the sessions could somehow have been vetted or rated for the different experience levels of the audiences they aimed to reach.

That is my critique, and I offer it respectfully. This is an event that has stood the test of time to be sure, founded by enthusiasts who were among the very first to appreciate the significance 3D printing might offer. They chose a very good road at the outset, so one expects they will choose just as well at the crossroads.

Let me then close by returning to the various ways the event this year once again succeeded. Another success: the role the conference played as a showcase and a benchmark for innovative ideas in AM that have been realized in the year since it was last held. In the series of photos above, find a few of the examples that I found.

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