



It Seems to Us

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Lessons From Dayton

“The annual Dayton Hamvention® is the largest and most diverse gathering of radio amateurs in the world. As such it’s a good ‘barometer’ for Amateur Radio.”

Judging from this year’s event, the outlook for Amateur Radio is as warm and sunny as the weather that graced southwestern Ohio over Hamvention weekend. The parking lots were fuller and the flea market bigger than last year; indoor exhibit space was sold out. The affiliated events — held in conjunction with but not a formal part of Hamvention — continue to grow and multiply. For many attendees “Dayton weekend” has become four days long, even five in some cases.

But it’s not simply a matter of numbers. Amateur Radio is not a mass-participation activity and never will be; that’s not our goal. In the entire population, the good prospects for Amateur Radio are a minority. Saying so is not elitist; it’s simply a fact.

More important than the head count is that this year, many Dayton attendees commented that they felt a positive energy in the gathering. People were excited about what they were doing in Amateur Radio and wanted to share that excitement — that passion — with others. No matter what interests you right now, you could find others with the same interest and who wanted to learn more. Being immersed in such a positive environment is bound to get you fired up!

We bring ARRL EXPO to Dayton every year because it offers the best opportunity to showcase the League’s wide range of programs and services to the largest number of members and other amateurs. But the information flow is not one-way. We also come to Dayton to learn. Being there gives us the opportunity to hear what’s on members’ minds and — best of all — what you are doing to promote and advance Amateur Radio in your communities.

Working with a team of experts who serve on the ARRL Public Relations Committee and with volunteers in the Field Organization, Media & Public Relations Manager Allen Pitts, W1AGP, has been using a series of themes to explain what we do to the general public, directly and through the media. From your feedback it is clear that the latest theme, “The DIY Magic of Amateur Radio,” resonates with many members. Many of you are excited about building, either once again or for the first time, and are discovering the myriad of reasonably priced kits and other products aimed at the Do It Yourself market.

For the ARRL, sharing a message with members is pretty easy. We have *QST* going out every month, now in a digital as well as a paper edition. We have the website. We have e-letters and e-mail. But how do we reach those who might like to join our ranks if only they knew what Amateur Radio had to offer them? How do we penetrate the fusillade of media messages that constantly bombard everyone? That’s much more difficult than preaching to the choir.

At the national level the ARRL works hard to build a positive awareness of Amateur Radio and achieves some success. We know this because Amateur Radio is a part of the popular culture, popping up regularly in movies and television shows. But people don’t often decide to join our ranks based solely on

that exposure. It takes personal contact to turn “I might like to do it” into “I’m doing it” — but venturing outside the comfort zone of family and friends may not be easy.

It was exciting to learn in Dayton what some outstanding local radio clubs are doing “to promote and advance the art, science and enjoyment of Amateur Radio” in their communities. Those 12 words are in quotes because they constitute the Core Purpose of the ARRL as adopted by the Board of Directors. Some clubs are partnering with DIY clubs, particularly those with an electronics or computer bent. Others are joining up with amateur astronomers, in at least one case collaborating on the construction of a radio telescope. Such cross-fertilization enriches both groups.

Still other clubs, recognizing that boring or contentious business meetings cause the death of more social groups than any other disease, have found ways to minimize the time spent on the necessary but mind-numbing details of governance while maintaining transparency — a tricky balance to achieve but well worth the effort. As a result they are able to focus their meetings on learning and doing.

It was refreshing to talk to club leaders who recognize the peril of having too little demographic diversity — that is, having a club with members who are all about the same age. In that case it will be difficult to attract younger members and it is almost inevitable that the club will shrink over time and eventually disappear.

A challenge facing many clubs is how to keep members involved once they are unable or reluctant to drive at night. These older members have a wealth of experience to share, but they may need a helping hand — or more specifically, a ride — and don’t want to ask for one. In Dayton we heard about clubs that excel not only in extending a welcome to newcomers, but also in making sure that their veteran members don’t fade away prematurely.

The ARRL National Convention is coming up October 12-14 in Santa Clara, California and will also feature ARRL EXPO. It won’t be as big as Dayton by any means, but based on past Pacificons it will offer just about as wide a range of opportunities to learn. The West Coast often leads the way in Amateur Radio; for example, the trend toward greater involvement by women and families first became evident in California some years ago.

What lessons will we learn this year in Santa Clara? We can’t wait to find out!

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