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Conferences draw high tech officials to Tucson

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By Kyle Schliesman

Inside Tucson Business

Two local conferences attracted hundreds of scientists to Tucson last week from around the country.

The first-ever Photon Forum drew 68 people, including high-level technology officials in the optics industry. The Southwest BioPartnering Conference drew 330, including bio-tech professionals from around Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and Colorado.

Sponsored by the publications Optics Report and Laser Focus World, the Photon Forum came close to its target of 75 attendees. The actual number was close enough, especially considering the caliber of the guests who showed up to Loews Ventana Canyon for the April 5-7 event, said Kathleen Perkins, chief executive officer of Breault Research Organization and publisher of Optics Report.

"The titles of the people there were all C-level," Perkins said. "It was really gratifying at some point to see the tables of eight and the forum lend itself to really high-level exploratory conversations. A lot of times, you can't make that happen."

The feedback on the conference was very positive, Perkins said. The conference received the highest marks on its content. The team that put the conference together worked with presenters to create discussions and presentations that were both broad and technically specific. Putting that together took a lot of hard work, but hopefully next year will be a little bit easier, Perkins said.

"A first-time conference is a big undertaking. Until you go through the process, you never really fully grasp that," Perkins said.

The event had several things going against it from the outset, Perkins said. Other than being a first-time event, the forum also needed to attract people who are used to attending conferences in high-profile cities such as San Diego or Boston. Many of the eventual attendees had never visited Tucson before.

"Most people really loved the location. They were surprised at Tucson and how much they liked it," Perkins said.

Breault Research Organization used some new lead-management software to improve its ability to recruit attendees to the conference. The software tracked who used the photon forum Web site (photoforum.com), how long they used it and what they accessed through the site. The company used that information to follow up with people who seemed most interested in attending.

"We got like 20 people signed up in one day once we installed that software," Perkins said. "By concentrating on those people, we were able to follow up with them. Then you are targeting people that are highly interested, and then it all clicked and came together."

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The Southwest BioPartnering Conference, which took place April 5-6 at the Hilton El Conquistador, also came close to its target attendance of 350. More impressive, though was the breadth of people attending, said Michael Cusanovich, president of the Bio-Industry Organization of Southern Arizona, which organized the event.

"We had a good turn out, lot of good talks," Cusanovich said. "I think we've identified the core now."

However, for those who didn't get to attend the conference, a follow-up presentation is being edited and prepared. The conference will be broadcast on Cox Cable's channel 74 from April 17-23 at 8 p.m.

"Access Tucson filmed a lot of it," Cusanovich said. "We're actually making a DVD of that. We'll make that available, too."

Both of the conferences' organizers plan to hold their events in Tucson again.

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