

The Inner Sanctum of Organization or Messin' with the Neatniks

Seven AM on a spectacularly beautiful, clear, crisp spring Saturday, I awoke, dressed, left the bucolic comforts of Naugahyde to drive into the urban jungle that is New York City. The weatherman on the radio urged people to bundle up. The National Weather Service had put out a storm advisory: a freak blizzard had started to dump fifteen inches of unseasonal snow onto the NY metropolitan area. But like a Persian postman I would not be deterred. Onward to attend the New York Gets Organized conference presented by the National Association of Professional Organizers. I was to learn the organizational secrets of the professionally organized. April Fool.

I arrived a half hour early so as to observe behind the scenes just how well organized were the meeting's planners. The venue was the Helmsley Hotel, a well known midtown hotel named after a well known, strong-willed businesswoman and convicted felon. The banquet rooms, their ornate, crystal chandeliers glistening, could just as easily been the site of a Colgate-Palmolive regional sales conference or Abdul Farouk's going-out-of-business, no bid refused, oriental rug auction. Everything was neatly labeled - the people, the registration tables, the meeting rooms, even the Lillian Vernon floral canister door prizes.

Clearly there had been extensive advanced preparation. A petite sparkplug of a woman, acting as a battalion commander, with enough nervous energy to light the room, hurried about checking arrangements and confirming assignments. Extensive typed lists were handed out to the "room captains" and "greeters" responsible for handling room set up, speaker videotaping, session handouts, traffic flow and distributing post-session questionnaires. Some one else checked that the tables with the morning service of coffee and pastries each had appropriate waste bowls for empty NutraSweet packets. Each name badge had been carefully color coded so that the staff could direct attendees to the sessions for which they had preregistered.

There might very well be a gender gene for organizing. Women clearly dominate the organizing business. And they are likely to be called Stephanie or Linda. Only one man was to be found in the entire program. and he billed himself as "an executive coach." Instead of the traditional, boring, authoritative, eponymous, male-centric names such as *Bain & Co.*, *Arthur D. Little*, *Arthur Anderson*, or *McKinsey & Co.*, many gave their services imaginative, light-hearted descriptive names like *Paperchasers*, *Cross It Off Your List*, *Under Control*, *Next Actions*, or *A Place For Everything*. But somehow they reminded me of the cutesie names pet groomers often use for their businesses like *Clip N Cuddle*, *Creature Comforts*, *Paws A While*, *Bow Meow*, or *Dog O Rama*.

I was hoping to discover innovative fashions for organizers. At the last Academy Awards presentation, one winner received her award for best costume design in a frock constructed solely of American Express Gold Cards. At this event, I at least expected to see someone attired in a suit made of yellow, for Spring, PostIts, looking like Sesame Street's Big Bird. Alas, I was disappointed. The women here didn't even wear fragrance. And the most novel article of apparel I saw was a clever gold-plated broach designed with a hoop on which to hang reading glasses. Of course, they were for sale.

However, the age split of the speakers was interesting enough to observe to make up for the lack of

fashion statement. Organizers seem to have found their calling in two different ways. The bulk of group were mothers in their early fifties. When their children grew up and left home, instead of, for example, becoming realtors or opening gift stores in their communities, they used their well-honed and toughened life experience mastery to start organizing businesses and make a living marshalling others around.

These women were most likely to be generalists like the Aviance wearer. Equally adept, they could clean out a garage, organize an office, straighten out finances, manage a move, dispose of an estate etc. These were also the naturals. They all were either born with or developed their skills and habits at an early age and had successfully used them to manage households and raise their families. During the conference they were the most type A personality: focused and rigid, highly competitive, and lacked a sense of humor or proportion.

The rest of the group were women in their late twenties or early thirties who, having had some experience in the job market, decided to start out on their own in a field that required little capital investment. They were more likely to be specialists in one particular area. For example, an ex-banker might become a great financial planner and have as messy a desk as the rest of us. Or an ex-computer programmer might balance a checkbook but couldn't straighten kitchen cabinets. Likewise an ex-publisher might excel at records organization but could handle computer files. But all of them with a proven inclination for organization under pressure, stayed loose, and had kept a decent sense of humor.

As the conference was slated to convene at 8:30, one stalwart member of the planning committee emphatically kept insisting that no one enter the hall. By 8:15 she was so drained, she threw her hands up and exclaimed "I can't control this crowd!" When the group finally flowed into the ballroom for the opening speeches, what was apparent and remarkable was the distribution of the people the conference attracted. Of the 220 attendees, I counted only 11 men. And most of these, I found out later were vendors waiting to market to the crowd, along with an occasional spouse being dragged along for the ride. The practical implications of this mix for the lone male escaped me until one tall and attractive organizer from Pennsylvania came onto me and asked whether I was attending to learn about organizing or would rather pick someone up.

The women appeared to fall into two distinct personality types along with the same age split as the presenters. The first type could be called the "seriously organizationally challenged." We are talking major league anal retentive neurotics. Some of these tightly pursed-lipped matrons would have even been over the top at a Messies Anonymous 12-step group therapy session. Instead of a large waste can, these folks needed a dumpster to get organized. My favorite had accumulated 20 years of The New York Times, which had completely engulfed her apartment. These desperate types sat earnestly through each session and hung on every word of the presenters, taking notes that they would save forever.

The second type of attendee was, as one pleasant and well-groomed kilt-clad woman from Douglaston concisely described herself, "anal compulsive neurotic." These women were all already super well-organized and interested only in comparing their own abilities against the tips of the experts. Most of what was presented was for them old news. They either already ran their own organizing businesses, were evaluating starting one, or were just looking for an excuse to have a day

on the town while their husbands had to stay home and mind the kids. These are people who carry their Filofax as dearly as a 7th Day Adventist carries his bible, with complete submission and devotion.

While its likely that these women had more heroic feats hidden in their past, my vote for most organized attendee went to a young woman from New Jersey with laughing eyes who conceived her second child on July 13th and noted in her planner to deliver the next April 6th. Three years ago, on the night of April 5th, she informed her husband that her water had broken. Annoyed because he thought her kidding, he responded with chagrin that she was taking her planning obsession a bit too far. She delivered her son 10AM the next morning. No one in the office where she worked expected any less of her.

The sessions, ranged over four organizational tracks: home, office, project, and time management, differing significantly in quality and utility. I learned hints about preparing a shopping list by supermarket aisle, sorting family photographs into archival binders, maintaining "tickler" files, setting up Quicken, visualizing goals, and "mind mapping" projects. But my feelings were shared by most that the 45 minute sessions were far too brief to adequately develop a theme, elaborate specifics, and field questions.

During the meetings, people with their own businesses actively networked their brains out, sold products, or in some way hustled the crowd. Perhaps determining that I needed her help, one determined redhead in amply padded peddlepushers surprised me with flyers announcing a new edition of her book revealing the secrets of developing charisma along with schedules of lectures she was to give at a local adult education center. Another lower keyed woman circulated her self-published books on working solo around the table at lunch. Others passed out business cards with magnetic backings.

By the break for lunch, chinks were appearing in the conference's organization armor. Speakers became flustered when sessions ran late and kept them from setting up on time. At lunch, speakers had difficulty answering simple questions like "What is your favorite organizing tip?" They were coy on how much they charged. One said she wasn't "judgmental," when asked what they would do if a client asked them to help them cheat on their taxes. Potential liability was glossed over. The organizers organization lacked a certification process or clear standards for screening prospective members. It was clear that NAPO had a long path to travel before it could be mentioned in the same breath as the AMA or the American Bar Association.

By three PM I began to get a headache. Remorse had set in for staying cooped by indoors on such a beautiful day. I wasn't gaining much in the way of new information but I did win a loose-leaf organizer in the door prize drawing. Clearly had I stayed at home, I would have accomplished more. But just being around a group like that creates a certain energy and motivation. All the following week, I did spring cleaning.