TECHNICAL COLUMNS

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By **Ron Hranac**, former *Senior Technology Editor,* **Access Intelligence** and *Communications Technology* **Magazine**

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RON'S SCTE CABLE-TEC EXPO WRAP-UP
By RON HRANAC

SCTE's Cable-Tec Expo 2011 has come and gone, and to say the confab was a success would be an understatement. The Georgia World Congress Center in Atlanta was home to Expo Nov. 15-17, 2011, although things actually got underway a day earlier with a pre-conference capacity-management symposium slotted for most of the day. Technical workshop sessions also were held that day, which wrapped up with SCTE's annual membership meeting followed by a reception.

Overall, attendance was more than 10,000, an increase of some 24 percent from 2010. International attendance, representing 60 countries outside the United States, was up 21 percent. The number of exhibitors, at close to 400, was up 8 percent. Heck, the exhibit hall was surprisingly busy on the last day, something that rarely happens at conventions. Impressive, to say the least, considering Cable-Tec Expo was held the week before Thanksgiving.

Multiple tips o' the hat to the SCTE Cable-Tec Expo Program Committee, chaired by Suddenlink Communications' Terry Cordova, and to SCTE's headquarters staff for putting together an absolutely outstanding event.

Sessions And Savvy

As usual, the opening general session was top-notch. I especially enjoyed its "conversation-style" format with Motorola Mobility's Sanjay Jha and Cox Communications' Pat Esser. That was followed by a pair of informative CTO and industry partnership panels.

Enhancing 2011's Cable-Tec Expo was a significantly expanded slate of educational opportunities. There were more than 70 individual presentations in 40-plus technical sessions. Yours truly moderated the "RF Measurements" technical workshop, and I was a speaker in that same venue along with Broadcom's Bruce Currivan, Motorola's Rob Thompson and Rohde & Schwarz's Paul Denisowski. Thanks, guys, for doing a superb job. I had a chance to sit in on several other technical workshops during the week, and most were packed to the rafters (or nearly so).

Tuesday's annual awards luncheon recognized the SCTE's best and brightest contributors. Congratulations to all of the well-deserving recipients, especially SCTE Hall of Fame inductees Harold Null and Terry Cordova, and a very surprised Member of the Year: Charter's Tom Gorman.

Can you believe 2011 marked the 21st year the spirited competition in the International Cable-Tec Games has been part of

SCTE

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Expo? Comporium Group's Greg Brakefield took the overall title.

A new addition to Cable-Tec Expo's closing night was the

SCTE IP Challenge, in which a slate of finalists from a virtual qualifier in September and October 2011 put their IP knowledge and

skills to the test. The inaugural IP Challenge champion was Time

Warner Cable's Steven Callahan. Wrapping up closing night was

the 23rd annual ham-radio operators' reception, emceed by your

humble correspondent and changed up a bit this year to a "ham

radio transitioning to RF communications" event. Continuing the

expanded education theme of 2011's confab, the ham-radio gathering – open to all Expo attendees, by the

way – included presentations by the American Radio Relay League's Laboratory Director,

Ed Hare, and ARRL Southeast Division Director Greg Sarratt.

My Favorite Things

Each year, I manage to squeeze some time into an otherwise

hectic schedule to look for interesting technology, goodies

and gadgets on display in the exhibit-hall booths. I wasn't

able to make it around the entire show floor last November

but a few things caught my eye. Here, in no particular order,

are my Cable-Tec Expo 2011 show picks.

If you've been involved in product testing in the lab, you know

that evaluating amplifiers and optoelectronics for noise and

distortion performance often requires a rack full of equipment

to simulate a headend's worth of channels. Rohde & Schwarz

had a new CLG multichannel signal generator that does the

same thing, but in a 19-in.-wide x 1 RU-tall chassis. That's not

a typo! The R&S CLG covers the 47 MHz-1002 MHz frequency

range and supports the generation of as many as 160 analog or

digital signals, including North American and European channel plans and bandwidths. http://www.rohde-schwarz.us

January 31, 2012 • Page 2

Back for an encore appearance in my show picks was a

demonstration of CableLabs' pro-active network maintenance

(PNM) tool. In 2010, in a departure from my usual product

choice, I gave the nod to the PNM demo as my overall show

favorite. This time around, the PNM demo was enhanced with

live in-the-field troubleshooting, in which Comcast's Scout Flux

(based on the PNM tool) was used to remotely identify a real

problem in an operating cable system. Local staff in that system

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were directed to the problem area based on guidance from the Cable-Tec Expo show floor! In short order, a loose connector was identified as the source of a micro-reflection, and it was fixed while attendees in CableLabs' booth watched in real time, complete with video and audio from the field. CableLabs' PNM best-practices document is available at www.cablelabs.com/ specifications/CM-GL-PNMP-V02-110623.pdf

How would you like spectrum-analyzer-like functionality provided by a low-cost network-powered device not much bigger than a cylindrical pay-TV security trap? The folks at Arcom Digital were demonstrating their new f-Scout Probe (availability: early 2012) that screws into just about any network device's 5/8-24 port and is powered from the seizure screw. The f-Scout Probe measures the relative amplitudes of downstream signals in the roughly 50 MHz-900 MHz range and transmits the measurement results back to the headend via an upstream frequency shift keying (FSK) carrier. Multiple probes can be installed throughout the plant and are intended to be used with Arcom Digital's Hunter or a dedicated signal processor. www.arcomdigital.com

As the cable industry continues to increase the number of quadrature amplitude modulation (QAM) signals carried on its networks, the availability of digital-compatible leakage-detection equipment becomes ever more important. The reason is that conventional leakage detectors were not designed to work with noise-like QAM signals. The previously mentioned Arcom Digital introduced a QAM compatible leakage-detection product during 2010's Cable-Tec Expo (see www.cable360.net/ct/ sections/columns/broadband/44189.html for more information).

ComSonics is joining the digital-compatible leakage-detector club with its new QAM Sniffer, expected to be available during the first half of 2012. The company says QAM Sniffer will be as easy to use as their existing detectors, and the cost is expected to be about the same. www.comsonics.com

The bright orange color of Belden's Snap-N-Seal pocketsized cable-strip tool was hard to miss (Belden is now the home of Snap-N-Seal connectors). About the size of a stubby pen, the pocket-sized tools – 4.76 in. x 1.1 in. – are made of medium-strength ABS plastic and feature carbon steel blades in each end of the tool to prep drop cable for connectorization. A simple diagram showing how to insert the cable into the tool along with the cable size are embossed on the tool. The ends of the tool are color-coded for cable size: black for 59- and 6-series cable, and gray for 7- and 11-series cable. The main body of the tool includes a pen-like pocket clip. Part number TBPST supports all four cable sizes, while TBPST596 covers 59- and 6-series cable. www.belden.com

And The Winner Is:

And my Expo 2011 show favorite? Drum roll please…

After I saw the in-booth demo, JDSU's SmartID advanced coax probes went right to the top of my "this-is-really-cool" meter. About the size of some of today's cellphones, the probes are intended to be used with the company's existing DSAM product line. The probes can characterize, verify and certify in-home wiring quality (and its topology!) for traditional cable

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services and MoCA, covering 5 MHz to 1.6 GHz. They're said
to be useful for troubleshooting, too, helping to find hidden
splitters, amplifiers and faulty cable. www.jdsu.com
Mark your calendar for 2012's Cable-Tec Expo, scheduled for
Oct.17–19 at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando.
See you there!

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