

Evaluation Report of “Building the Capacity of Minnesota’s Wood Products Manufacturing Industries: Harnessing Innovation”

A Blandin Foundation Vital Forests/Vital Communities Conference

August 2006

Summary Overview

On August 16 and 17, 2006, over 80 people gathered at The Lodge at Giants Ridge near Biwabik to discuss how to harness Minnesota’s unique forest resources, cutting-edge design and innovations to open access to new and expanded markets. It is evident that the participants appreciated this conference, whose principal sponsor was the Blandin Foundation, as a time and place to network, learn, and invigorate their businesses. They were motivated to attend because of the high-caliber presenters, especially Jim Brandenburg, David Salmela, and Todd Siler, and the opportunity to network with colleagues. Several panel discussions provided information on topics including the adaptation of design traditions from other regions, best practices in the industry, and how to work more effectively with gatekeepers. Another highlight of the conference was the presentation of the 2006 Wood Products Manufacturing Industry Achievement Awards. Besides gaining valuable business contacts, participants noted they learned important insights into practices and applications of innovation, the value of ideation and brainstorming, and connecting good design to added value. Finally, several participants communicated their hope that the conference be carried forward next year, despite the Blandin Foundation’s stepping down from taking an active role in organizing future Wood Products Manufacturing Industry conferences.

Participant Profile

Roughly 40 percent (33) of the conference’s participants completed an evaluation form. Of these, 16 were representatives of secondary or primary wood products manufacturers. Five were economic development professionals. Two were state or federal government officials, while an additional two were architects, designers or specifiers.

The remaining respondents included a representative of an environmental organization, an industrial forest manager, and others.

The majority (25 of 33) had attended last year’s wood products manufacturing industry conference.

Use of Minnesota Resources

Respondents were asked two questions about the value of Minnesota wood resources to their businesses. Of 32 respondents, eight said up to 50 percent of their raw material comes from Minnesota and 5 indicated that over 50 percent of their raw material comes from the state. Seven said they use no Minnesota resources in their business.

The respondents noted these obstacles hindering their increased use of Minnesota forest resources: not enough resource (6), cost of resource (5), resource not present (5), resource quality is inadequate (3), lack of resource information availability (3), and other (3).

Conference’s Value

All responding participants said the conference met or exceeded their expectations, and their expectations were tied to a variety of motivations for their attendance:

- Networking opportunities.
- Quality speakers.
- Learn about innovation.
- Learn about best practices from other companies.
- Learn about forestry and the value-added industry.
- Previous quality experiences at past Vital Forest/Vital Community conferences.

Of the 25 respondents who had attended last year’s wood products conference, 10 said the 2006 edition was more useful and 14 said the two conferences were of similar merit.

Participants reported acquiring helpful information that could be utilized in their business, whether it be in the field of manufacturing, financing, or design. All of the conference's sessions were highly evaluated. On a scale of one (low) to five (high) the six main sessions were ranked as follows:

Session	Average Rank (1-5)
David Salmela/Jim Brandenburg - keynote presentation	4.6
Todd Siler - Innovation: Making it Work	4.3
Awardee Panel - Best Practices in the Industry (<i>Jack LaVoy, moderator</i>)	4.2
Thomas Fisher: Adapting the Best	4.1
Working More Effectively with the Gatekeepers (<i>John Rajala, moderator</i>)	3.8
Quick Pitch Sessions	3.7

The Foundation and its partners¹ designed the conference to achieve specific outcomes. The following table indicates how much, on a scale of one (low) to five (high), respondents felt their participation generated those outcomes. Noticeably the opportunity to network at the conference was a major result of the conference as was learning about cultivating a culture of innovation in one's workplace. The following table displays respondents' assessment of how well, on average, their participation in the conference equipped them to achieve the various target outcomes:

Conference Target Outcome	Average Rating (1-5)
Strengthened my personal connections, working relationships, or business opportunities among wood products firms, designers, technology resources, and/or potential investors.	4.1
Increased my knowledge of how to create a culture of innovation in my company.	4.0
Enhanced my understanding of how to increase impact of front-end design on success of end product.	3.8
Increased my awareness and understanding of Minnesota resources (raw material and producers).	3.6
Strengthened my connections within the state's value chain (e.g., primary to secondary, secondary to architects, etc.).	3.5

The list of things "to do" inspired by the conference mentioned by the participants denotes the conference's tangible impact:

- Follow up with contacts regarding potential projects.
- Contact government agencies for additional education/support.
- Follow up from network results.
- Create more innovation, modeling.
- Think outside the box more.
- Explore ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan).
- Communicate more internally.
- Mentoring – strengthened idea to do this.
- Hire Todd Siler to speak at our company.
- Strategic plan.
- Get in touch with suppliers of Minnesota wood for more information.
- Increase research into Minnesota products.
- Find and build a supply chain of Minnesota products that is presently incomplete.
- Talk to architects.

Several respondents expressed their desire that the conference be continued next year, despite the Blandin Foundation's stepping down from its role as lead planner and organizer. Many people praised the quality of the topics, speakers and presentations.

¹ Event co-sponsors with the Blandin Foundation were the Forest Products Society, Natural Resources Research Institute (University of Minnesota-Duluth), Minnesota Power, and Northland Foundation, and Iron Range Resources.

Logistics

Most respondents had learned about the conference directly from the Blandin Foundation (23) or from a colleague (8). Others learned of the conference from an e-mail listserv, newsletter, and other sources.

The meeting facility and event logistics were rated “excellent” by 9 respondents, “good” by 19, and “fair” by 6. No one rated them as “poor”. One person noted that the video screen “was low and hard to see”.

Several respondents commented on the great planning and organization of the conference, thanking the Blandin Foundation and other sponsors for their work in facilitating the event.

Results

The following are the raw results of the evaluation.

1. Are you primarily attending the conference as a representative of:

4 primary wood products manufacturer	12 secondary wood products manufacturer	2 architect/designer/ specifier
1 environmental organization	0 public land manager	5 economic development professional
1 industrial forest manager	0 local government official	8 other
2 state / federal government official	2 architect/designer/ specifier	

2. Does your facility use Minnesota forest resources in some or all of its products?

5 Yes [50 percent+ of product] 8 Yes [0-50 percent] 7 No 12 Not Applicable

3. What obstacles hinder increasing your facility’s use of Minnesota sourced forest resources?

5 Resource not present	6 Not enough resource	3 Resource quality is inadequate
5 Cost of resource	6 Other	12 Not Applicable

Other: Lack of information; call purchasing at our shop; limited demand; need information and source of availability; on time deliveries; consistent and reliable quality; information availability.

4. Please rate each presentation according to its value to you and your business.

Session	1 - Low	2	3	4	5 - High
David Salmela/Jim Brandenburg - keynote presentation			2	8	17
Todd Siler - Innovation: Making it Work			5	12	15
Quick Pitch Sessions	1	1	13	9	8
Thomas Fisher: Adapting the Best		3	3	15	11
Awardee Panel - Best Practices in the Industry (<i>Jack LaVoy, moderator</i>)		1	6	11	14
Working More Effectively with the Gatekeepers (<i>John Rajala, moderator</i>)		1	11	10	9

5. Did your participation in this conference generate the following outcomes?

Outcome	1 - Low	2	3	4	5 - High	Not applicable
Enhance your understanding of how to increase impact of front-end design on success of end product?			10	16	5	
Increase your awareness and understanding of Minnesota resources (raw material and producers)?		3	10	15	3	
Increase your knowledge of how to create a culture of innovation in your company?			6	20	5	
Strengthen your personal connections, working relationships or business opportunities?		1	5	19	9	
Strengthen your connections within the state's value chain (e.g., primary to secondary, secondary to architects, etc.)?		2	7	16	5	1

6. What actions have you added to your company's "to do" list as a result of this conference?

Create a simple PowerPoint with the magazine pictures from Todd Siler's interactive exercise and e-mail to table
Communicate more internally
Hire Todd Siler to speak at our company
Keep pushing - this re-energized me
Mentoring - strengthened idea to do this
Value of ideation, brainstorming
A bunch
Strategic plan
Innovation practices/applications
Read some of the books
Follow up with contacts (4)
Get in touch with suppliers of MN wood for more info
Talk to architects
ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan)?
Find and build a supply chain of MN products that is presently incomplete
Contacting government agencies for additional educational/support
Additional opportunities
Create more innovation, modeling
Think outside the box more
Increase research into MN products

7. What motivated you to attend this conference?

The speakers and presentations (5)
Bringing people together to work "on" their business, not in their business
FPS
Access to the type of presentation done by Brandenburg, Salmela and Siler
Networking (5)
Being on VF/VC Committee
My boss
Idea generation
Importance of forestry to our region
Businesses are potential clients
Understand the challenges and changes going on in the value-added industry
Innovation topic (4)
The award nominees
Bernadine
To learn best practices from other companies
Good experience at previous conference (4)

8. Did this conference meet your expectations?

13 Yes, exceeded expectations 20 Yes, met 0 No

9. How did you hear about this conference? [check all that apply]

23 Directly from Foundation 8 Colleague 1 Newsletter 4 Email listserv 2 Other

10. If you attended last year's conference, did you find this one more or less useful?

10 More useful 14 Of similar value 1 Less useful 3 Did not attend last year's event

11. Please rate the conference facilities and logistics.

9 Excellent 19 Good 6 Fair 0 Poor

12. What additional comments would you like to share with conference organizers?

Offer a rate for full-day conference only

Great conference attendance which attracts owners and CEOs for their ideas and to network

Get people to use the mike, not just to hold it

Great, organized conference

I hope you will help to identify an organization to carry this conference forward and help sponsor/fund!!

Use Margaret Fisher as a featured speaker if you do the conference again

Very impressive line-up of 'headliners'

Inspiring messages - why didn't I bring a tape recorder?!

Great stuff!

Thanks to Blandin and the sponsors for making this happen

See you next year

Great focus on creativity...connecting good design to added value

Thanks for great planning!

Factory tours to visually see technology, processes, culture, etc.

Loved and were inspired by speakers and made valuable connections

Thank you Blandin Foundation and all organizers