Attending Industry Conferences: Sharing Back

Writing a paper that summarizes your conference activities and the benefits that will accrue to your organization will help you obtain funding to attend future conferences.

By Mike Gruenberg

In every industry, attending conferences and trade shows is considered an integral activity, especially for association members. There are regional meetings, national meetings, and even specific topical meetings that are held for the benefit of the membership and the overall profession.

Aside from learning about the latest industry trends and earning continuing education credits, the reasons to attend these conferences are varied. Some people may want to bond with old friends and/or meet new friends; some may want to see the latest products being presented by industry vendors; and some may be looking for a new job. All of this is playing out while attendees spend 3-4 days examining the latest technologies, dining with vendors and colleagues, and meeting with salespeople and their company executives while also trying to find time to see the local sights.

But in these days of declining budgets, the costs associated with employees attending industry trade shows are drawing more and more attention from finance departments. Considering the time spent out of the office and the travel, hotel, and event costs associated with industry meetings, many organizations want to see a healthy return on their investment in this area. If there is even a hint that attending an association conference or show is not worth the expense, that budget item likely will be reduced or even eliminated.

Here’s the thinking: What did our organization gain by allowing Alice to attend her association’s conference in Denver? We think she learned a lot there, but so far, we haven’t been apprised of the benefits. We just know she went to Denver for a few days to attend an association conference.

That analysis may sound somewhat caustic, but all too often, the people who have budgetary responsibilities think of business travel in terms of how it benefits the organization, not you as an individual. The result is a “tug of war” between the benefits and costs of attending, and every person who submits a request to management to attend a conference gets caught up in this struggle. What, then, must you do to ensure your request is not only approved, but welcomed by your superiors?

It’s all about communicating with management, meeting the organization’s expectations, and showing results. Failing to meet even one of them, the management of your library will likely support sending you to the next association conference (and future ones as well).
At the conclusion of any conference you attend, you should write a brief paper that describes the sessions you attended, your meetings with vendors, your takeaways from the conference, the expected benefits that will accrue to the organization, and any “to do” items.

Communicating with Management

Communication is probably the most important aspect of the equation. It is essential that you provide information to your supervisor as to why you would like to attend the upcoming conference. In your communication, you must demonstrate that you really believe your attendance will benefit the organization—and be able to enunciate the reasons why.

The first step is writing a memo to your supervisor explaining why you would like to attend an upcoming conference. For example, the primary rationale could be that you need to see a new product being unveiled by your favorite vendor. That product, you could say, might be very helpful in reducing the library's research costs. By citing concrete benefits in explaining why you should attend, you will be more likely to enroll your supervisor’s support.

Another rationale for attending may be to research multiple vendors to better align the subscription service you are currently receiving with certain aspects of your organization's activities. Where better to interview multiple vendors in a relatively short period of time than at an industry conference?

Perhaps there are certain continuing education courses being offered that will help you be more productive in your day-to-day activities, thus making you more of an asset to your organization. “If I take the following course offered at the conference, I will be able to anticipate and more effectively deal with coming trends in technology that we will be facing in our industry,” you could write. That rationale would be tough for any manager to turn down.

In sum, it is important to share with your management in advance how much you—and they—will benefit from your attendance at that conference in Denver. You may be surprised to learn that your supervisor(s) may have certain ideas about what you should do, whom you should see, and what you should try to accomplish while you’re there.

Meeting Your Organization’s Expectations

OK, so your request has been approved. You’re going to Denver to the annual association meeting, and one of your goals is to see a new database retrieval tool being unveiled by a vendor that, incidentally, commands a healthy portion of your budget. What are other vendors doing in this regard? What is the industry stance on this technology? Your organization expects you to know the answers to these questions, and the conference in Denver may reveal this information.

Perhaps your library needs more resources on a certain topic. At the conference, there may be multiple vendors exhibiting products that can fill this need. Your mission is to determine which one will best suit your library’s needs, then deliver a report to your supervisor after the conference on the results of your findings.

Much of this can best be explained using a concept called “the internal sell.” Whether you work in a university, public, government, or corporate library, you need to demonstrate to your management and colleagues why your conference attendance activities are important for the well-being of the organization, not just for you. By enrolling them in your goals and understanding theirs, they will more readily support your efforts.

Sharing Results

At the conclusion of any conference you attend, you should write a brief paper that describes the sessions you attended, your meetings with vendors, your takeaways from the conference, the expected benefits that will accrue to the organization, and any “to do” items. (Of course, if those “to do” items affect others in your organization, you need to note that as well.)

Although this exercise may not be a requirement of your organization, it should be part of any post-conference evaluation, especially if you intend to attend future conferences. Simply put, the paper should address the following questions:

- Why did you go?
- What did you learn?
- How will your attendance help your organization?
- Who else will be affected?

For example, suppose your sales rep, her boss, and the president of their company were all present at the conference. That group of people might not get together at any other time during the year, so going to Denver was incredibly important in regard to strengthening your relationship with that vendor. When writing your paper after the conference, you might include something like this:

Based on my meeting with our sales rep, their VP of sales, and the president of the company, we will get their new e-content database for no cost for
six months. We will be able to test it with our patrons, and if it does everything they tell us it can do, we can purchase it at a greatly discounted rate for the first year of the subscription. We will be the only library in our industry to have this database for our research, giving us an incredible advantage over our competitors.

That is a concise statement of the results of the meeting, which you had told your supervisor about in advance as part of your rationale for attending the conference. You saw the need for the meeting, scheduled it, attended it, and are now sharing the results for all to see.

Resolving issues (e.g., “I met with the head of customer service, and that pesky problem we’ve been having with the billing is now resolved”), meeting with higher-ups in the vendor’s chain of command, or just having a frank discussion with your sales rep are all important details in the sharing back of information to your organization. Too often, information professionals attend conferences, gain incredible knowledge, and meet with important people, yet fail to report those activities widely within their organization. If it’s not written down, it doesn’t exist.

The responsibility for securing approval and funding for attending association conferences really rests with you. It’s no longer a given that just because you work in a library, you can go to a library association’s meetings. Justification comes in the form of demonstrating to management that these meetings are worth the expense because you will gain knowledge that will improve the library’s services, become more efficient, and, in turn, benefit the organization.

Although your organization may not have formal reporting requirements for those who attend conferences, I recommend that you always produce a document that tells why you attended, what you did there, who you met with, and the follow-up that is expected. Be sure to explain how the library and the organization will benefit from your attendance at the conference. As a result, you may find that funding for future conferences becomes more readily available. SLA