

Are Conferences Worth It?

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By Andrew Sobel

Business professionals spend huge amounts of time and money to attend or speak at conferences. But are they worth it? Under the right circumstances, they can be.

Is it useful to attend or speak at conferences? Can you really meet anyone of significance at them? Should going to conferences be part of your brand-building or relationship-building plan?

I am occasionally asked about the value of conferences, and my own clients have had mixed results from them—some good, some bad. "They don't work for me," a partner at a leading professional services firm commented to me recently, adding, "I went to one last year and found myself presenting to a group of my competitors from other firms. It was a waste of time." We can all probably remember a bad conference experience. Mine occurred nearly 20 years ago when I agreed to go to a financial services conference to present my firm's latest research on retail banking. I spoke after a very boozy dinner, by which point most of the participants were heavily inebriated. Halfway through my speech a loud crash and a shout reverberated throughout the conference hall—I thought a fight had broken out. In fact, one of the bankers in the audience had fallen asleep in his wooden chair, which was already tipped backwards on its rear legs, and it had flipped backwards, smashing into pieces!

That said, sometimes you can indeed make valuable connections at a conference and also build your public brand.

Whether or not a conference is useful for you will depend on (1) the benefits you seek in the first place, (2) the focus of the conference and the quality of the participants, and (3) how well you prepare for and take advantage of the actual event.

Potential Benefits

These can include:

- Meeting valuable contacts and extending your network
- Learning, either from the presenters or by having to develop your own ideas for a presentation
- Building your personal brand by speaking or being part of a panel
- Improving your confidence by getting out and mixing with other professionals
- Being "seen" by high level prospects or thought leaders, which can contribute to a sense that you are "one of them"

Keep in mind that if you are a speaker, your bio and picture will undoubtedly be on the conference web site, which will usually remain on the Web for years to come. This will raise your profile if a potential client looks your name up in a search engine like Google. So even if the event is a dud you will get some (albeit small) value out of an improved Google ranking.

Whether any major benefits accrue, however, will depend on who is there and how well you capitalize on the event.

Attractiveness of the Event

You have to ask yourself:

- Will there be buyers there? This is the key question: Will actual buyers of your services (or buying influences, or soon-to-be buyers) attend the event, will they hear you speak, and/or will you actually have the chance to meet them?

- Will there be others at the conference you would like to meet, for whatever reasons? (E.g., potential collaborators, key influencers, celebrities, thought leaders, etc.?)
- Will it be valuable just to say you were there? (I cannot think of many conferences that would fit this criterion, except for perhaps the World Economic Forum at Davos or a Star Trek nostalgia event in Las Vegas)
- Is it a sufficiently large event to make it worthwhile? While the most important factor is the quality of the attendees, it may be demoralizing to prepare for and speak at a conference where only 20 people show up, unless all 20 are CEOs.
- Whom do you want to meet?

There are really three possible targets at a conference: The organizers, the other speakers, and the participants. In truth, the first two may be the most interesting, unless it's a very high-level conference which attracts c-level executives. The conference organizers may very well be able to make valuable introductions for you, and if you are a speaker, you earn a kind of peer relationship with the other speakers for the duration of the conference.

Preparation

Here are a few things to think about before attending any conference:

- Always review the list of other speakers. Is there someone you'd like to get to know, or with whom you may have a common professional or personal interest?
- Ask the organizers for a participant list (tell them it's to focus your speech, which they will appreciate), and review it carefully.
- Show the list to your colleagues or other confidants and ask if they know anyone, or if they would like to connect with or deepen relationships with any individuals or firms who will be present.

Differentiating yourself

If you're a speaker or panelist, and you want to attract inquiries from potential clients or other important influencers, you've just got to have a truly interesting, differentiated, and compelling message. I have seen many presenters get up and show one boring PowerPoint slide after another at conferences, slowly lulling the audience to sleep. I watch audience members as they use their Blackberries, shuffle out for coffee, and nod off. You need to follow the rules for any good speech, which are spelled out in a number of excellent books on this topic. My own suggestions:

- Present a unique and possibly controversial point of view which will differentiate you and grab people's attention. Don't just spew facts—create some tension with an engaging perspective.
- Develop an opening hook to rivet the audience's attention in the first few minutes. This could be a surprising statistic, a provocative question, or a funny anecdote which makes a useful point or highlights a controversy.
- Try to use few or no slides. Tell stories rather than read from bullet points.
- Do something memorable in your talk. Show a video clip, play music, interact with the audience, leave the podium and walk around the room, and so on.
- Never sell yourself or your firm in your speech or appear to touting your credentials—it is a complete turn-off for the audience. You want to create potential buyers by earning the respect of the audience for your intellect and experience and by evoking their curiosity to meet you and hear more wisdom. (A friend of mine reported watching the CEO of a major technology company virtually booed off the stage at a major conference because he was overtly selling during his presentation!).
- Make sure your contact details are easily visible and available to participants—e.g., put your name, email, and a phone number on every page of your presentation and in your bio sketch.

Sometimes, conferences can definitely be worthwhile. David Butter, a former senior advertising executive, told me this story about a very successful conference experience:

"I remember learning that the new Marketing Director of American Express Europe, one of my top prospects, was speaking at a conference I was attending. I did some homework with my team, and as a result I was able to ask a well thought-out question during his talk, which in turn produced a thoughtful reply. At the end of his presentation I went to the platform and we 'engaged'. We agreed to have lunch (for my team and I prepared very carefully for). He was astounded how much I seemed to understand his key issues (not fully realizing he had spoken about them at the conference!), and within a few months, with a lot of support we won our first assignment with American Express. It went on to become my company's #2 client in Europe. And my friend became a catalyst to win us business in the US soon after."

In mingling with other participants, follow common-sense rules for engaging with others: Don't be shy about going up to people and introducing yourself. Have a few, basic questions prepared to get the other person talking. Introduce yourself, and state succinctly who you are and what you do. If appropriate, ask for the other person's card and give them yours. Try to briefly connect, and then move on.

If you're going to conference just to get educated, then enjoy the sceneryâ€”in that case it will be a bonus if you happen to meet someone interesting.

To summarize, think long and hard about why you're going and whether or not the conference makes sense given your goals. But keep in mind that most professionals are in the relationship marketing business, not the add-more-contacts-to-my-database business, and they often fail to invest in building relationships with valuable individuals they already know or can be easily introduced to by colleagues, clients, or friends. It takes time to attend conferences, and doing so should supplement, not substitute for, your relationship building efforts with that core group of 20 or 30 people who represent your "critical few" relationships that will truly help you and your firm prosper.

* "Thank you" to my colleague David Butter for his ideas and suggestions about this topic.

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