



FOCUS – How to Increase ROI on Attending a Conference

By Ann Rolfe

Attending a conference is a big deal. Being away from home, your business and clients, your time and the travel are all costs. I believe that you, and the organization that paid for your conference, should get value from it. One thing I've learned is when you attend any conference you must take some time out to absorb and reflect on what you've heard, think about how you want to apply it and list action steps. Otherwise, no matter how great the experience, how valuable the information, it will not become knowledge that is used to add value.

My tip for getting your money's worth from any conference is to FOCUS by thinking about:

Function – why are you there?

Overload – how will you take advantage of an avalanche of information?

Connect – be part of the community of learning

Unwinding – allow yourself downtime and recovery time

Sharing – pay it forward by giving to others

Function - why are you there?

Conferences can be fun and often they are in exciting places but the real reason you are there is ... what? Even before you decide you want to go, think about why. What do you want from the experience? How will you and your organization benefit? Set some goals, they don't have to be too precise because you never really know the full extent of opportunities a conference will offer. However, start with purpose and intention and you are more likely to gain value.

Overload – take advantage of an avalanche of information

How many hours of information can you absorb? A two-day conference, with a pre-conference workshop will deliver about the same as a semester at university without the intervals for review, digestion and application. So you need to have strategies for capturing the information and turning it into real learning. There are lots of ways to do this.

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You probably have recording capacity in your smart phone or tablet (you may have to check with speakers or organisers) before recording them. The drawback of audio recording is that you'll have to listen through all those hours again. A better option is an app, like Auditorium (about \$5.95). This gives you audio recording and note-taking by typing or writing and the advantage of being able to play the recording at a specific point in your notes. Alternatively, LiveScribe (about \$149.00) is an audio recording pen used with a special notebook. By tapping a point in your notes it plays back what was recorded at that point. You can upload, save and share your notes.

When I take notes, I use my own set of symbols to indicate my insights and ideas, actions, references I want to follow-up and direct quotes I may use.

Some conferences supply the presenter's slides – but don't rely on this. Slides are visual aids – the best one's don't contain much information, their purpose is to illuminate concepts. Some conferences provide a paper by the speaker. This is better but only if you actually take time out to read them later.

Whatever method you use, you've only captured the information and, if you took your own notes, some ideas and actions. You need to do more to transfer your learning and get maximum value.

Connect

A conference gives you access to an entire learning community. Perhaps the finest minds in the world on the subject matter. Make the most of it. Many speakers are generous with their time and every person in attendance has something to offer. Use breaks, as well as the formal and informal networking opportunities the conference affords, to connect with your colleagues. If you show a genuine interest in them and their work, people will share with you. Be sure to reciprocate and if you can link people with similar interests, or answers to questions, do.

It's great if you attend with a colleague. Sometimes you'll split up to attend different sessions; other times you'll go to the same one. Either way, if you take time to discuss the content, what learning you took from it and how you can use it you'll get more from the experience.

If you attend a conference alone, team up with people, one buddy or a whole group, with similar interests to debrief at lunchtime or in the evenings. Different perspectives are always interesting and often add new insights.

Unwind – allow yourself downtime and recovery time

The social side of a conference is important too. It is another opportunity to network in a more relaxed setting. Or, it can simply be a chance to relax. You need to be careful though, late nights and over-indulgence take their toll next day when you are trying to get the most from your conference.

Don't rush off at the end of a conference. I know everyone needs to get home but I actually don't understand people who've committed to spend x hours at a conference but cut the last session to get away early. For me, the single most important strategy is not to leave when the conference

ends. For the cost of one more night's accommodation, you can triple or quadruple the value of your conference.

Reviewing your notes, reflecting and listing your actions is time well spent. When I go to a conference, I take a few extra days and intersperse this work with lying by the pool, being a tourist, shopping and all the things that make travel fun, but I earn it. I believe in the saying "travel broadens the mind". I love what I learn from different cultures, places and the people I meet (you'll see that coming through in some stories and articles here, Facebook and on my blog). When you unwind and relax your subconscious takes all that stuff you learned and throws up all kinds of insights and ideas. You need to be in that state of mind that allows you to catch them and capitalize on the investment you made in being at the conference.

Share – pay it forward by giving to others

Before, during and after a conference ask yourself: how will I add value? If your organization is paying for you to attend, or sponsoring you to speak at a conference, you need to be instrumental in ensuring return on their investment. If you are self-funded then you owe this to yourself.

The law of reciprocity says you get out of things what you put in and although people help out at conferences in the spirit of giving, research says that there are health benefits, as well as many other positives, from paying it forward. So consider volunteering for a small or larger role in organizing or supporting your conference. Or just be helpful to fellow delegates, speakers and conference organisers. Speak to those who are on their own. Introduce people to one another, if you see something that needs attending to, do it or let staff know.

Share what you know and what you've learned. Prepare a summary, write an article, blog post or testimonial for the conference organisers or speakers to use. Back at work, deliver a "highlights" presentation to colleagues. Research shows that by teaching others you deepen your own learning. By giving you also receive, even though your motivation is altruistic.

Finally, put to work what you've learned. Schedule time each week for personal development remembering that learning and development isn't being a vacuum cleaner sucking up information, it is reflection, using new knowledge, enhancing it and adding value, just like the way that mentoring works!

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