

InfoTech Column
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Getting the Most Out of Your Conference Experience

by Stephen Abram

Every year I re-publish this 'classic' column around conference season. It has been reprinted around the globe and in many SLA chapter and division newsletters. It's a collaborative effort over many years representing centuries of combined SLA conference experiences. In this conference issue of Information Outlook, I thought it was timely to proffer the advice again!

The Basics

- Turn your cell phone off or set it to vibrate. Relate to folks face to face!
- Don't forget that the wireless is free throughout the conference venue. Blog, take notes, Facebook, downloads handouts, and more.
- Survival includes aspirin, Advil or ibuprofen- you're away and shouldn't let a small pain interrupt your conference experience.
- Bring a personal water bottle (conference venues tend to be very dry) and personal covered coffee container. Our Seattle conference is 'green'. Don't be seen contributing to the 35,000 cups that hit the landfill from a conference our size.
- Layer your clothes – you can never tell what the room temperature will be and it's never consistent. Temperatures and personal room comfort varies widely and there is precious little conference organizers can do about that. It is not uncommon to get evaluation forms back complaining that the same room is too hot and too cold at the same time. Plan ahead.
- Bring at least two pairs of shoes (you'll need the change and variety!).
- Bring an extra bag for bringing stuff home (clothes expand somehow while away!).
- Bring an office prepaid courier slip to courier Heavier acquisitions, brochures and materials back to the office (You're not a mule!). Plus librarians seem to buy books on the road.
- You **MUST** have business cards. Create your own on the laser printer or photocopier or have extras made up by your employer.
- Wear your nametag high so people can see it. Take it off when you leave the venues. You don't want assorted homeless people calling you by name!
- Upon arrival, orient yourself. Familiarize yourself with all of the conference locations (conference centre, hotels, and special events locations). **KNOW** where the coffee is - you'll be surprised how much you'll want it. Know where the washrooms are. Nothing's more frustrating than being lost in a strange place. If you're lost - ask a local. There's

usually a map in the conference program - study it. It's amazing how confusing big conference centers can be! For safety's sake - know where you are and where you're going. Look at the floor plans in your program; they give you a bird's eye view of what's usually not an easy grid floor plan.

- If you're on a restricted budget, bring your own water and snacks. Find the local grocery. Conference snack bars are on a par with airport prices.

Before the Conference

- Should you wish to save on accommodation cost, use your discussion lists to find a potential roommate.
- Check out the Seattle's tourism web site and book or schedule a few side trips as well. Exciting SLA sponsored tours have also been scheduled for delegates and their guests. You can sometimes get tickets late on the bulletin message boards.
- If you can, add a vacation day or two on to the conference and enjoy the rest of Washington or head north to Canada (grin).
- Look at the program before you get there and plan your day. A simple Word or Excel document makes it a lot easier. Use the personal planner.
- Make appointments in advance with those vendors you must see. Make or use an exhibit hall map in advance so you 'work' the hall strategically.
- If you work in a specialized area with information pros from around the nation, SLA is a great place to meet each other - for a meeting, coffee, lunch, dinner, drink, or just to say hi! Send these folks an e-mail or give them a call and see if they're going to the conference. Networking is so much richer when you have seen your closest contact's face (insert Internet irony here.)

The Sessions

- Always try to go to the opening plenary - then you'll have something in common to talk about with new people you meet for the rest of the conference. Indeed go to all keynotes. The plenaries are designed to be engaging and challenging. This year Vint Cerf, Charlie Rose and Seth Godin promise to be amazing.
- Make your schedule in advance (at least at the start of the day, but earlier if possible). Include all of the options you might like so that if one desired session is cancelled or doesn't meet your expectations or needs then you can hop over to another. Make sure you note the room locations so you can evaluate how much time you have to get there between sessions.
- Plan to attend the SLA Fellows First Timers' event to make a few new friends and get a conference orientation!
- If a session isn't meeting your needs, leave. Your time at this conference is important and you should get the most out of your investment in time,

effort and money. If you don't see another session you want then that means head for the Info-Expo exhibits.

- Generally you are 'allowed' to attend all sessions, including business meetings of the Association, divisions, and committees unless these are specifically marked 'in camera' or 'executive session'. SLA is a very open association and you should see how your association works for you. It's also a great way to find out what you might like to get involved in and volunteer.
- Make sure you get your tickets early for ticketed events. If you miss out on one event that you desperately want to attend - check out the message board area where there is often a ticket exchange for extra tickets.
- If you attend a business meeting and wish to be heard on an issue, you have a right to speak as long as you are in order. Just ask permission and you will be heard. If not, get out your Rules and make them work for you.
- If you want a good seat at a session, arrive a little early. If you're late, have a little courage and take a seat. Don't hover and shuffle at the back of the room or in the door. Librarians tend to sit in the end seat of every row and you'll have to shuffle theatre style to get a good seat in the middle of a row. Whatever you do, don't stand for an hour - you'll regret it.
- Evaluate programs from many directions - speaker, topic, title, blurb, sponsor, or convenor. If you're not sure it's for you, the speaker can usually be asked what level they will be speaking at just before the session. Then again, even if you're at an advanced level on a certain topic it's always useful to learn how to communicate the topic at an introductory level so you can use it for users and management!
- Don't forget to take advantage of the pre-conference workshops. You get deeper training there than in some sessions designed to provide highlights.

The Info-Expo Hall (Exhibits)

- Remember your business cards. You can enter draws. You can have materials sent to you later. You can have contacts follow up later with more detailed information. You can look professional.
- Write on the back of the business cards you pick up to remind you what you learned or what you'd like to follow up on later - even if it's just to visit an exhibitor's Web site or request a product trial.
- *The top three questions...*
 - What do you have that's new?
 - Can you demo something interesting for me about your new/enhanced/improved products?
 - Are you making (Have you made) any announcements at SLA this year?
- Learn a stump speech about you and your employer to answer the booth staff's questions. They are trying to learn about YOU in order to make sure that they can give you the information you need in context. Being

- shy or furtive about your needs denies you the right to ever complain that your vendors don't understand you!
- Some Exhibitors host hospitality suites for their best or prospective customers. If you're invited, go. They're often fun and you'll meet key players in the library world.
 - DON'T be embarrassing! Hoovering through the exhibit hall looking for free pens and avoiding eye contact with anything resembling booth staff is not the image librarians want to project.
 - Please remember that often vendor staffs are also professional librarians. Booth staffs are often not only account managers but often vendor executive teams and key training or customer service staffs who come to SLA to learn and network.
 - DO pace yourself. Look at the map and choose whom you absolutely MUST see and go there first. Better yet - make appointments in advance.
 - DO ask as many questions as you like. If the booth person doesn't know the answer they will find someone who does and get back to you later.
 - DO attend vendor demos in the booth - these give you an idea of what's there that might be new or they might serve as mini-training sessions.
 - DO help yourself to the marketing materials in the booths - that's what they're there for! If the vendor offers a 'goodie', make sure you have a conversation and learn what's new.
 - DON'T assume that your old familiar vendors haven't changed and that you know everything about them. This is your opportunity to learn what's new and different.
 - If you have no idea what a vendor does - they're completely new to you - ASK. This is your opportunity to learn something new. Booth designs are notorious for not telling you WHY you'd want to talk the people there - overcome that barrier.
 - Remember that vendor staffs are people first. Don't stereotype. Don't be combative just for the fun of it - vendor bashing is a sport where no one wins. Be open to their suggestions - they've usually seen lots of libraries and library situations and have something to share.
 - DO wear comfortable shoes. There are rarely enough places to sit in the Hall.
 - DON'T be reluctant to say "No Thank You" if you're not interested.
 - DO thank the vendors for sponsoring the conference in so many ways. As a result of their participation, your conference experience is definitely richer and less expensive.

Networking and Social Events

- Take time for yourself on field trips, tours, or social events. You are working much longer hours at a conference than 'average' and it is just fine to take a break. You'll definitely absorb more if you rest occasionally! There are no more martyr awards at the conference than there are at home.

- Learn these 'Ice Breaker Questions'. Use them with seatmates and in line-ups and at coffee stations, wherever. Even if you're shy, they will often induce even the most recalcitrant and shy person to open up.
 - "Hi - I'm your-name-here and I'm from your-town-or-library-here. Where are you from?"
 - "What's new at your shop?"
 - "See anything new at the conference?" "Attend any great sessions?" "Learn something new?"
- Come to the conference with specific people, institutions and contacts you'd like to meet. Learn the art of the nametag glance to see what networking opportunities you might find. Don't project false cliques or status on people - ALL of the people you'll meet were in your shoes once.
- You're going to be in lots of lines (for food, for coffee, for meetings, etc.) at CLA. Take this as an advantage and network with your line buddies - don't just stand there.
- Leave the office at the office - professional networking does not ALWAYS have to have a 'pure' business purpose. It's great to have professional friends and acquaintances that are outside of your normal 'box'. It stretches you and it's one of the great values of the SLA Conference.
- Don't horde your business cards - they're not gold in your pocket - they're like smiles - they only have value when they're given away.
- In general, assume anyone who's wearing a ribbon is extra-approachable. They tend to be the people who have volunteered to make the SLA Conference a success. Help them by networking with them.
- Local librarians staff the hospitality booth - ask their advice for restaurants and sights. They know. They live in Seattle! Visit the DC booth too to plan for next year's Centennial Conference.
- Don't be shy about asking people to join you for dinner or to set up dinner groups - eating is a great networking opportunity.
- Be nice to a student. Welcome them to the profession by treating them as a colleague.
- Always try to go to the conference wide event party. This year it is on Wednesday night and it's guaranteed to be fun and you'll make friends for life.

Getting Involved

- Be positive - no one wants to be involved with a whiner. Librarians will listen because they're polite but don't take that as endorsement for bashing SLA, individuals or vendors. People remember your positive contributions and interactions in a better way than negative ones.
- You'll probably meet your next employer at a conference. First impressions are important. Dress for the job you want.
- Write a report or memo to your boss or team and explain the value of the SLA conference to you and what you learned. Start laying the groundwork for coming back next year in DC.

- Volunteer - let people know that you're interested in trying new things or experimenting with a role in your association, committee, unit, chapter or division. It's the classic win/win situation!

The Association

- Please make a point of attending the Annual Business Meeting and candidate's speeches. It's when you can see the real work accomplished by the Association's leadership and volunteers this year.
- You'll also likely meet our Association's Executive Director, Janice Lachance and some of the great SLA staff at this conference. They are always listening mode - so speak! Our staff works hard for us every day and at the Conference. Meet them and thank them.

Valuing Your Conference Experience

Here's what I think are the best benchmarks that I use to value my SLA conference experience:

- I met at least one new person every day.
- I learned at least one useful thing that I didn't know in a session every day.
- I had at least one substantive discussion with a vendor about a new product that I might need.
- I had fun, every day.

* These hints owe a huge debt to the SLA Fellows and in particular Dan Trefethen and Susan Klopper, who created a First Timers' Package for the Los Angeles SLA International Conference in June 2002.

Thanks,

Sincerely,

Stephen

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