

# “At Least One” Way to Add Value to Conferences

*Get more from attending a conference by stretching your personal and professional boundaries and following the “at least one” approach to attendance*

By **Warren J. Wilson**

I suppose I could have titled this “Lessons Learned” or “Getting More Back Than You Put In,” as my advice comes from my experiences attending conferences. Although I cherish my solitude, when it comes time to attend a conference, I look forward to seeing many of the friends I don’t get to see on a regular basis. Year in and year out, the most fun and best learning experiences come from the exchange of pleasantries, ideas, and information that occurs between sessions in the hallways, exhibit hall, social functions, airports, and numerous other occasions when two or more attendees meet. I cannot remember the number of times I have contacted people from the conference to ask questions or to share ideas and opinions, long after the conference has ended.

This is not to say that the sessions aren’t useful. On the contrary, I have found many of them to be an invaluable means not only to share information but also to get me to think about issues. They act as a catalyst for further discussions, both at the conference and back home. I have used the sessions as a way to meet presenters and attendees. Through these contacts you have access to a vast wealth of knowledge and ideas.

In *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, Volume 25, Number 3, 2002, Joan Getman and Nikki Reynolds published an excellent article about getting the most from a conference. (For the full text, see <<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eqm0239.pdf>>). The authors listed 10 strategies that a conference attendee could use to maximize the conference’s yield in information and motivation:



1. Plan ahead.  
2. Set realistic expectations.  
3. Use e-mail to keep yourself on track, both at the conference and afterwards.  
4. Write a daily summary of what you learn.

5. Share all of your ideas and experiences with your colleagues.
6. “Divide and conquer” the program with colleagues for the most benefit to your institution.
7. Talk to people at the sessions you attend to create a network of new colleagues.
8. Attend sessions that will introduce you to new ideas rather than those where you might feel the most comfortable.

9. When you return home, set up an action plan (with milestones) and commit yourself to reflecting on and assessing what you have learned.
10. Realize that the effect of attending a conference could be as subtle as a change in attitude.

I will not attempt to synthesize the article further, as you can read it yourselves. The authors' suggestions will help you efficiently use the conference experience, the conference tools, and related presentations back on your own campus. Having effectively employed this advice for attending conferences, I have some additional advice based on the "at least one" principle used throughout the rest of this article.

## Professional Development

To begin, attend at least one conference or professional development activity each year. As you plan which conference or activity to attend, look at the variety and depth of sessions and how they would help you achieve your goals and the goals of your organization. To get the most out of your conference experience, plan to attend at least one preconference seminar or identify at least one important session to attend. (If attending an EDUCAUSE event, you can use Itinerary Builder on the EDUCAUSE Web site to schedule sessions.) There are so many good sessions, it is generally difficult to decide which you will attend.

In sessions, use your PDA, laptop, e-mail, or a piece of paper to write down at least one idea that you want to follow up on after the conference. In this same vein, after the conference share at least one idea or piece of information with your staff—and multiply the benefits of your attendance at the conference. You will probably have at least one immediately useful idea or piece of information for each staff member, especially if you kept this goal in mind during the conference.

## Contacting Vendors

The EDUCAUSE annual conference has for several years scheduled the morning and afternoon breaks, lunches, and opening reception in the vendor

area. You'll want to attend at least one of these events and probably all of them. While in the vendor area, visit at least one—and preferably all—of the vendors whose products your institution employs. Visit at least one vendor with whom you do not currently do business and find out what is new or unique about their product offering. Look up at least one vendor with whom you previously did business or whose staff has moved to a new vendor. They know your situation and will have many ideas for you to consider. Also, each vendor has at least one customer like you or trying to do something similar to what you want to do. The vendors and their staffs are a fountain of information that you should not overlook. And remember, take at least one grain of salt along with whatever a vendor says to you!

## Reaching Out to People

Back to the social arena. Look up at least one person you met at a previous conference or event. Even at a large conference, you will see many people you have met over the years. Talk with at least one of these people about at least one current or hot topic. After you have met someone twice, that person will be more apt to give you "the rest of the story." In addition, I always try to go up to at least one presenter after a talk to get additional information. These postpresentation conversations provide additional illumination into the topic.

My most important suggestion is to meet or introduce yourself to at least one person at the conference you've never met before. I received this advice more than 25 years ago, and it still is something I do at every conference. A surprising number of people will remember you, even years after the introduction. This also pushes you outside of your comfort zone of acquaintances and allows you to discuss ideas with people who will expand your world of thoughts and information. Not only that, but no doubt they'll introduce you to at least one of their friends, and so on.

I also try to meet at least one person to whose job or position I aspire. This allows for your own professional growth

and gets you acquainted with a possible mentor.

The circle of contacts you make through these steps will prove invaluable over time. These conversations give you access to a network of new colleagues, information from experts, and mentoring possibilities.

## Reviewing the Conference

After returning, review the conference. Identify at least one good session and determine what made it a good session. Write down the name of at least one new person you met and something interesting they had to say.

Think about volunteering for at least one activity at the next conference. The more involved you get, the more you get out of the conference.

Consider submitting at least one presentation proposal. This is a very competitive process but still an excellent learning endeavor. EDUCAUSE has several publications and publishing options, so work on at least one of your good practices or ideas and submit the article for publication. At least once—get involved!

## Planning for the Future

If you return from a conference with a feeling that something was missing, first look within yourself. Did you try at least one of these suggestions?

As you push yourself to meet at least one new person, you will gain confidence and likely affirmation that you have at least one interesting project of your own to discuss. You will also learn new information and procure at least one new, quickly applicable idea.

Your own professional development is at least one of the benefits you will receive from conference attendance. In our information technology world, change is inevitable. So, productively use what you've learned from attending at least one conference and make at least one plan on how to survive and flourish. *e*

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