

What Makes a Professional Conference Worth Attending? |

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Spring is here, and many of you are looking forward to planning your conference calendars. Last month I wrote about the benefits of attending a professional conference and how to make the best use of your time there. This month let's take a step back and examine what makes a conference worth attending. My overriding message is that, while everyone may rank their

preferences differently, no one should ever sacrifice or overlook quality. By considering the following factors, you'll decide what makes a conference worth your time and money and answer the question, "Should I stay, or should I go?"

Educational Programming Is Key

Educational value is a common reason to attend conferences organized by professional associations, and there's no better way to further your career than by tapping into an association's body of knowledge. Attendees come together

to prepare themselves for the challenges they face every day in their jobs, so conferences to consider attending this year should impact you directly and relate directly to your job. Before

deciding, review the agenda or session roster available on websites or in conference collateral (brochures, e-mail blasts, etc.). Read the session titles, and see who the speakers are and the organizations they hail from. Get a sense of the learning objectives associated with each session, and compare them to your skill set to see if you can strengthen weaknesses or hone new skills. If content doesn't correlate with your daily job responsibilities and the learning objectives aren't clear, then take it as a strong indicator that it may not be the right conference for you.

Consider Keynote Speakers

The caliber of speakers a conference organizer has lined up usually sets the bar in reference to how well attended the event might be. Good keynoters provide insights, wisdom, and overall business experience that conference participants can benefit from and relate to their own



careers. A worthwhile conference will have several speakers who span different industries, positions, and experiences but who assimilate with the overall conference theme. IMA's 88th Annual Conference and Exposition, for example, will feature speakers from finance, technology, government, and consumer industries, each with the ability to demonstrate how their roles correlate to the accounting and finance profession. Remember: Business is fluid and changes over time, so getting advice from those who influence change is invaluable.

Travel Is Broadening

A well-planned conference will provide a balance between classroom learning and knowledge exchanged in relaxed environments. An event planned at a resort hotel most likely will offer beautifully landscaped surroundings that are great for walks or a dip in a spectacular pool. On the other hand, an event planned in a top-tier city will offer great restaurants, museums, and sporting events. As the old adage goes, "travel is broadening," so consider the venue as another factor in determining the worth of a meeting. After all, the time spent away from the ongoing conference activities will help you clear your mind and better prepare you for the following day. Good conferences include opportunities to unwind after the daily agenda is completed. At IMA's Watering Hole, for example, Conference attendees can share their thoughts and insights from the day's sessions. It can also be a great place to meet other

professionals and find a dinner mate or two.

IMA is pleased to hold the 88th Annual Conference & Exposition at the JW Marriott Desert Ridge Resort and Spa in Phoenix, Ariz. After a full day of learning and networking, attendees can paddle through one of the resort's luxurious pools and enjoy dinner at one of their fine on-property restaurants. Other resort services are available, and IMA's specially negotiated room rate leaves plenty of money in your budget so you can feel good about your entire conference experience.

Dollar-for-Dollar Value

Of course the cost of a professional conference can quickly influence a decision. Although it's tempting to look at the registration fees first and

then look at the educational content, it

may be an unfair way to evaluate an event. Be sure you understand what's included in the total conference registration fee. How many meals and receptions are included, if any?

How many hours of education and hand-

outs are in one concentrated multiday period? Is there an exhibition hall where you can see the latest products and services? Review the program for all of the value-adds that will enhance your learning portfolio and those that allow you to give back to your company. Also consider the networking opportunities and potential contacts. One good idea, one shared solution, or one new concept embraced can pay for your conference fee several times over.



Pulling It All Together

All the factors that I've mentioned are important in deciding whether to attend a conference. But perhaps the most valuable advice you can get is by listening to others who have attended previously. A word-of-mouth testimonial provides great information from a "user's perspective." Testimonials often are included on conference websites and in printed brochures. Look for them, and see if people's comments resonate with you. If no testimonials are available, contact the conference organizers, and ask them to put you in touch with some people in your local area or from your industry who've attended the event in the past. Not only will you get the inside track on the caliber of the event, but you will have made a contact and expanded your network.

In for a Penny, In for a Pound

Once you've made the decision to attend a particular conference, congratulations! You've done your due diligence, and now it's time to embrace the event. Remember: No one is more interested in having a worthwhile experience than you are, so make the most of it. What you put into the event (your enthusiasm, your interest in learning, finding value in a speaker's comments) is what you will take away from the event.

Professional conferences will undoubtedly continue to be valuable places of learning and growth in the accounting and finance profession. I hope these insights help you in your search for the conference opportunity that's right for you. Join me next month when I'll offer some advice and "how to" tips to first-timers (or those who haven't been to a conference in recent years). ■