

Is Networking at Conferences MORE Important than Publishing?

Leo A. Mallette, Ed.D., Leslie Evans, and Clare Berger

Pepperdine University

Abstract

Presenting papers and listening to research results being presented is one thing to do at conferences – and disseminating results of research is very important. In addition to attending the presentations of fascinating topics, there are often opportunities to view the exhibits area, attend tutorials, experience some of the conference’s social activities, visit relatives in the city, and most importantly: Network. This is especially important for people who are self-marketing; such as almost-graduates, new graduates, doctoral candidates, post-docs, and business people who are planning an employment change.

Conferences have many more dimensions than traditional journal and book publishing due to the quick turnaround, oral presentation, immediate feedback, and the opportunity for networking. Conferences are where you can meet the experts in your discipline, the professors you may want to study under, the authors who wrote key books in your field, other graduate students who are having difficulty with their dissertation, the hiring managers that you might eventually want to work for, or people you might want to hire. Where else could you have access to these people in an informal atmosphere? Conferences are the ideal networking opportunity and you are urged to bring your business cards and meet people. This article is extracted from Chapter 14 of the authors’ book: *Writing for Conferences*.

Background

There are about 50,000 doctoral graduates every year (ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database, 2009) and probably many more master's and bachelor's degrees awarded. Many of these graduates are actively seeking new or improved employment and one way to stand out is to be a published author. Conferences have many more publishing dimensions than traditional journal and book publishing due to the quick turnaround, oral presentation, immediate feedback, and most importantly, the opportunity for networking. These additional dimensions are not typically discussed in other articles (Malette, 2006, 2008). The authors have written a book on scholarly writing for conferences and networking to develop further research and career opportunities. It suggests that conferences are one of the ultimate networking events. This article is based in part on the contents of Chapter 14 (Malette, Evans, and Berger, 2008)

Introduction

What else one does at a conference is different for different people. Individuals may be more social or more reclusive, and others may have relatives in that city that they want to visit. In addition to attending the presentations of fascinating topics, there are generally opportunities to view the exhibits area, network, and experience some of the conference's social activities. We don't recommend that you catch up on reading or catch up on sleep in your room, but we do strongly recommend that you bring your business cards and meet people! There are two major *what else* things to do at a conference: networking and non-conference activities. We'll talk a lot about the first activity and very little about the second.

Network, Network, Network

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Networking can be done in a variety of venues. Let's chat about a few of them and, more importantly, why you would do this.

Networking for Job Opportunities

Some conferences do not allow postings of job openings, while other conferences have a career center as part of the meeting venue. Many have a cork-board or table for messages and allow job openings to be posted on the board or placed on the table. We've often seen, at smaller specialized conferences, a single page job posting with a pile of business cards on a table near the registration booth. If the shoe fits, call the cell phone number on the business card.

This is your opportunity to talk with potential employers officially through the career center, semi-formally by arranging to meet potential employers at the conference, or informally by networking and finding out who might be interested in your expertise. Hand over your business card when you meet potential employers. They'll remember you and often will hand you one of theirs. Keep it. You never know when you'll need it. Later, make notes on the back about what you discussed or what you promised to send. With such a challenging economy as exists in 2009, it is even more important to network at conferences

Depending on your stage in life, work, or schooling, you may not be ready for a job change and may still be struggling in developing a thesis or dissertation topic. This is one of the advantages of conferences: free dissertation advice.

Networking for Dissertation Assistance

There is an old saying that says: everyone loves an undergraduate. This can be modified to: *Everyone at a conference loves a graduate student.* This may be because (a) they remember

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the help they received from a mentor at a conference, (b) they remember how hard it was for them and they would have liked a word of advice, (c) they are not yet to your level and aspire to reach the scholarly goal you are trying to achieve, (d) they regret stopping at the bachelors or master's level and not trying to pursue a doctorate, or (e) they tried and failed and they want you to do well – they don't want you to end up like they did (for example as an ABD).

This is also your opportunity to meet other graduate students in your field of expertise or others that are in a similar field and can commiserate with the pain you are experiencing. One of the larger conferences (sponsored by AERA) has a very active graduate student council that hosts a separate room for the conference where graduate students have a few introductory sessions, gives them a place to land between sessions, and most importantly for students, snacks!

No one is doing the same research as you, but you'll meet people who have the same interests, or have solved a similar process problem. One student shared a problem with studying in the evenings while kids were still awake and demanding her attention. She resolved the distraction problem by doing family things until the kids were in bed and then would work on her dissertation while the kids were asleep, the TV off, and the dishwasher running. One night every week or three, she would devote an entire evening when she would *allow* her kids to visit Grandma. This may have allowed her less time to work on the dissertation, but it was uninterrupted quality time.

You'll be a graduate student for only a small portion of your life. This is the time to meet others and commiserate about the pain you are experiencing and congratulate each other on the progress you're making. These student comrades are the ones that will be publishing papers in

the next decades. Hand them a business card. They may become paper reviewers for journals, and they may be the ones reviewing your journal submissions. They can also be potential co-authors.

Networking for Future Publishing Opportunities

If you presented a paper, your presentation was put into that particular session because it meshed nicely with the other presentations, under a common theme. You can gain synergy in your paper by carefully listening to earlier speakers and building on their thoughts. You can also approach the other authors, hand them a business card, and suggest a joint paper for the next conference or for a peer-reviewed journal article. Meeting potential co-authors at conferences may not always be convenient. You may not want to pursue a line of research or add to your current workload, but it's always good to keep your mind open to future publishing opportunities.

Networking to Create Alliances and Partnerships.

This is also the time to look for business opportunities. You will be exposed to a myriad of ideas and concepts by people who are at the forefront of your industry. You may find that there may be more than a job ideally suited to you. No, you may be able to create alliances or begin partnerships where you will be a principal in a new endeavor – whether that is starting a new school in Nicaragua, a new software startup company, or a new book.

In this section, we've discussed places and reasons to network during social events at a conference. Protocol for most other parts of conferences is to listen to the speakers and learn from the material they are presenting. Take the time to participate in the social events at a conference and talk to people at every opportunity you get. And give them one of your business

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cards. We've talked about what you would do, but where would you do this networking?

Networking at the Exhibits Area

The exhibits area (if there is one set up) of a conference is a tremendous area for learning directly from the people who supply these products. There is information available that could not be found on a company website. You'll have an opportunity to look at the product, twiddle the knobs, flip through pages of the book, meet the author or editor, evaluate the product, run a simulation, bounce it on the ground, and otherwise obtain information in ways that could never be done on the internet or with a sales brochure.

This is also an opportunity to network and learn the names of key individuals at these companies. It may be a sales person, but they may also be the acquisitions editor, or the chief designer, or a VP of the company. It never hurts to have the business card of a key person in your list of people to contact when you need information or a job. The exhibits area of a conference is informative and can be fun, but it can also be an employment treasure-chest if you are looking for a new opportunity.

Networking at Social Functions

There are several opportunities for networking at social functions as part of most conferences. Many of them have something to do with eating and everybody has to eat.

Breakfast. Many people are trying to wake up, go to breakfast, and look through the conference program to make last minute decisions about which sessions to attend in the morning. If you see someone or a small group with a conference badge or program, go and ask if you can join them. You can find out where they work and if they are presenting a paper today. Don't

forget to give them a business card.

Lunch. Unofficial lunches are great times to get to know someone or about their company. Ask an author that you are interested in meeting what they are doing for lunch. They may be free or busy or already committed to a group lunch. It's best if you've scouted out a local place and have suggestions ready. In any case, it's a good opportunity to learn and pass out your business cards.

Breaks. There is often a mid-morning and mid-afternoon break between paper sessions. This is a good time to casually chat with several people as they are getting coffee or water. Do not interrupt people who are making a beeline to the bathroom.

Dinner. This is the same as for lunch, but you may have the time to change into more casual clothes. If you get invited to a group function, you may end up in a group with someone famous that you might have never met otherwise. Again, it's a good opportunity to learn and pass out your business cards. In addition to the casual meals on your own, there are also the official conference meals. The *Awards Luncheon* or *Dinner Banquet* are more formal events with speeches, a keynote speaker, or award presentations, but there is still plenty of time to talk. Again, network, network, network.

Open House (sometimes called Hospitality Suite). We feel that it is socially irresponsible to miss these. These are catered events that bring people together and they are usually sponsored by one company. They can be held in a hotel suite, or one of the conference rooms. Food is usually provided and it ranges from finger food to a full buffet dinner. Don't be a glutton. People will remember your manners. There is often a bar – it may be an open bar (where drinks are free)

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or a cash bar (where you pay for the drinks, yes even soft drinks and water). Never drink to excess. People will remember your behavior, especially if they have your business card.

The Hotel Bar. Many people arrive at the conference hotel during the day or evening before the conference begins. Glance in the bar or hotel lobby (there is often a sitting area). You might find someone you know, or someone you recognize from a previous conference. Introduce yourself, but keep a professional profile.

Special Conference Events. Conferences often sponsor tours of local companies or local attractions, visits to historic sites, or a golf tournament. Don't underestimate the value of networking at special conference sponsored events.

Poster Sessions. Poster sessions are intended to share information between the author and the participants in a small, sometimes one-on-one setting. This is generally a good time to network and meet people, but conversations that are not related to the topic being presented should be kept to a minimum since the author may be needed to discuss his topic with someone else. Don't ask for a job interview to an author at a poster session. Be aware of your surroundings. If you are monopolizing a poster session author's time and you see others waiting to chat, then politely stand down (Thanks Diane. I see there are others waiting to talk to you. Here is my card; I'll call you next week about the statistical methods you are using.) or ask the others to join the conversation (Hi, we were just talking about Diane's results. What do you think about her survey on the *no child left behind* program?).

In this section we discussed meals as one of the vehicles for networking; you may be ingesting more calories than you normally do, so you may want to continue or increase (or

restart) your exercise regimen. You can choose from golf, the spa, the exercise room in hotel, swimming, a brisk walk, or jogging. Most of these can be networking opportunities too!

Follow-up to Networking

Write the name of the conference (initials are fine) and the year on the front of the business cards you receive, and write notes on the back of the card. Indicate that you volunteered to send them a paper or a link to a web site, or that they were going to send you something. When you get home, read the back of all your cards and promptly complete the action you promised. File the card after you've completed the action. You may want to add more notes to the back of the card if there is room.

During the week after the conference, it is good etiquette to send a note or email to individuals who made an effort to talk to you or help you, even if neither of you had any actions. Tell them how they helped you and ask for more help if you think of something you needed. If you send a real (paper and ink) note, don't forget to include your business card.

Another way to connect following a conference is to use one of the many social networking sites (SNS) available through the Internet, including FaceBook, MySpace, and Twitter, among others. You can blog and tweet to build and expand your personal world of virtual communication. If you are not yet part of social networking (SN), it's time to get connected! Approximately 60 percent of Americans are regularly interacting on a SNS, and it continues to grow across all segments of the population (Core, 2008). SN is here to stay.

Summary

So, is networking at conferences more important than publishing? We think the answer is

yes, but it also depends on your goals for attending the conference. We've identified two broad categories of *what else* one does at a conference – networking and non-conference activities and we discussed the networking in great detail. We don't recommend that you catch up on reading or catch up on sleep in your room, but we do strongly recommend that you bring your business cards and meet people! In addition to attending the presentations of fascinating topics, there are generally opportunities to network for job opportunities, for dissertation assistance, for future publishing opportunities, and to create alliances and partnerships. Networking can be done in the exhibits area and at any of the myriad of social functions at conferences. Experience some of the conference's social activities and be sure to follow up your networking by fulfilling promises you made and sending thank you emails or notes on paper or via your social networking sites. And **don't forget your business cards!**

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Author's Biographies

The authors met while in the Organizational Leadership Doctoral program at Pepperdine University and found they had a common interest in publishing papers and mentoring younger students in the fields of the publishing landscape. Together, they have written the draft of a book called *Writing for Conferences*.

Leo A. Mallette, EdD is a Supporting Faculty in the Decision Science discipline in the Graziadio School of Business and Management and a doctoral committee member for GSEP at Pepperdine University. Previously, he worked in system engineering and subcontract management of satellite systems at the Boeing Company for 30 years. Dr. Mallette has published over 60 conference and peer-reviewed journal articles on atomic frequency standards, satellite systems, optical detectors, root-cause investigations, organizational leadership, and publishing, and is the co-editor of *The SPELIT Power Matrix* (2007).

Leslie Evans advises global companies on how to successfully navigate through organizational change issues during large scale business transformation initiatives. She has over 20 years of organizational development experience in manufacturing, service, retail, nonprofit and academic environments. Ms. Evans is currently a Senior Associate with Infosys Consulting and holds a BS in Management, an MBA (emphasis in Global Business and in Leading Organizational Change) and is finishing her doctorate in Organizational Leadership at Pepperdine University. Ms. Evans has published extensively on issues involving cross-cultural capability, technology implementation, success strategies of high achieving women, and leadership.

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Clare Berger is communications director for a higher education organization in Southern California serving over 36,000 students. She holds a BA from UC Irvine, an MBA from Pepperdine University, and is currently working on a doctorate in organizational leadership at Pepperdine University.