Survivors guide to conferences

So you're off to a big conference. Whether you're a seasoned professional or a first-timer, conferences can be a daunting challenge; filled with opportunities, new experiences and perhaps just a hint of terror. However, they are fantastic occasions for learning and today more than ever you'll want to get the most possible out of your attendance. Forget simply listening to talks passively and think about maximising your conference experience:

- **Plan ahead.** Go through the programme, at the latest on the ride over, and plan which sessions you really want to attend. Think about questions you want to ask speakers or suppliers on the guest list. Plan ahead too if you know key colleagues are going to be present and schedule a specific break in the programme to meet up. Don’t leave it to chance, as it’s all too easy to be swept up in the conference and lose track of time.

- **Pack smart, think casual.** Doubtlessly you'll want to look your best for any social functions, but you might be surprised quite how casual the dress standard is at conferences. Two or three days can be a long time to be dressed to the nines. Dress for comfort during those lengthy plenary and breakout sessions and your body will thank you for it. Save the glamour for the evening.

- **Comfort zone.** While you might attend alongside some workmates, the worst thing you can do is spend most of your time with them. Break out of your comfort zone and make new acquaintances. Make it your goal to speak to ten new people every conference day and you’ll come away with a richer, broader professional network.

- **Speakers.** Conference speakers run the full gamut with generally something to interest everyone. Take the opportunity over coffee or dinner to chat informally to speakers who match your own particular interests, they’ll be delighted to share. It will pay dividends, but remember not to monopolize all their time. Chances are they’ve got other people they need to talk to, so be prepared to let them mingle.

- **Question everything.** It can be daunting sitting in a lecture theatre full of the great and good to ask what sounds in your head like a dumb question. Remember, there are no dumb questions only dumb answers! Chances are that if you thought of it you won’t be the only one. If you’re one of those people who can never think of questions at the end, jot down potential questions in the margin of your notes during the session, and get ready to ask them.

- **Interact with everyone.** Conferences shouldn’t be passive experiences. You have to put in to get out, even if you’re only a delegate. Get involved in
the breakout sessions, ask the suppliers searching questions, stand up and get noticed. If you simply sit like an information sponge, you’ll be kicking yourself on the train back.

- **Reflection.** That said with packed and engaging programmes it can be easy to end up rushing hither and thither and yon, and suddenly find yourself on the train home wondering how to make sense of it all. Make sure you take the odd session off to just sit quietly, go over your notes or chat to a few colleagues about issues of the day. It'll aid memory retention, help make sense of it all and also give your brain a chance to refresh itself, heightening your attention for the next session.

- **Networking.** It almost goes without saying that conferences are unparalleled opportunities to network with other librarians and associated people. If you spot someone alone in a corner, go over and introduce yourself; broad networks are after all the foundation of a successful career. You never know when a new conference acquaintance will become an invaluable contact.

- **What you leave behind.** It should be the day job. Don’t spend all the time on the phone back to the library sorting out issues. Don’t stress about what’s happening back in the cataloguing room. Focus on where you are and whom you’re talking to or else you’ll find you come away with a very piecemeal unsatisfying view of the conference; not to mention running the risk of seriously annoying your fellow delegates.

- **Spin control.** It’s all too easy away to end up engaging in a spot of gossip as you network, but don’t be drawn into it. Professional ethics aside, the librarian-world is rife with hidden communication networks and a less-than circumspect comment might haunt you for years. A more positive and sensible approach is to frame any criticisms in a developmental and experiential light.

- **Overdoing it.** As in don’t. It’s easy with sponsored drinks and social events in and around bars, with your bed only a simple stumble away, to end up having one too many. Come the morning after at best you’ll find yourself not taking anything in or at worst trying to live down the night before. Certainly enjoy a social libation or too, but try and adapt the European staple of wine and water for a less dehydrated experience.

- **Write it up.** Make sure you write-up, tweet, blog or report back on your conference experiences as soon as is practical. It’ll help your remembrance of the issues, as well as progressing all those actions you promised yourself you’d follow up. The longer you leave it, the more likely it is you’ll find yourself staring at a page of notes and wondering what “Consider revise session” actually means! It’ll help develop dialogue with interested colleagues who weren’t able to attend.
**Fellowship.** And finally, just enjoy the companionship of your fellow librarians. There’s no better way to feel energised about the profession and career choices than a few days with like-minded individuals engaged in healthy debate.

If you keep these tips in mind next time you’re off to CILIP Umbrella or any of the big conferences you should have a more positive experience and get a whole lot more out of the time invested in attendance.

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