



The Value of Conferences

By Grant Hamilton

I have borrowed the title—and much of the content—of this article from a blog entry I came across by Deane Barker of Blend Interactive (who kindly consented to this theft).¹ Deane had just returned from Web Content 2009,² and was musing about conferences and the value of attending them. It seemed like a timely topic to me, especially with ATA's 50th Annual Conference just around the corner, and with division and chapter events and other professional development seminars occurring year round.

With the economy in the doldrums, the conference world has had it tough lately. It costs money to attend. Conferences eat up valuable time. People think twice about going. But before you dismiss the idea too readily, let's have a look at the five levels of benefit Deane identifies.

Acquiring Actual Skills

There are things you actually learn at conferences, discrete nuggets of information that you did not know before. Deane cites a presentation on globalization where he “came away with a dozen new ideas about things I needed to consider for [my firm's] own globalization projects.”

These “nuggets of information” can be anything. Freelance translators who attend seminars in their language combination can pick up actual strategies for solving actual translation problems. Translation company owners can learn valuable information on things like accreditation standards or labor law. And anyone involved in the business of translation can acquire new marketing or communication skills.

What Deane finds interesting, however, is that this is *the least common benefit*. As he says, “Unless you sign up for an actual workshop or training session that’s designed to teach you a new skill ... [you] don’t actually learn a lot of hard skills at conferences.”

Soft Learning or “Trend Learning”

As Deane explains, soft learning refers to those amorphous concepts floating around in your head that you “sort of know” or have “sort of heard of.” During a lot of sessions, you start to hear about these things more and more, and their relative applicability to your work starts to shuffle.

For example, I once figured that machine translation had no bearing on my workday or business. After all, I would smirk, who could take computer-generated translations seriously? Then I attended a seminar on machine translation at the mid-year conference of ATA’s Translation Company Division (TCD) in Denver in 2008, and my whole perspective shifted. Did you know you could “teach” a machine to translate to within 95% reliability in the automotive industry by providing it with two million pre-translated and pre-edited words? That is what Hannah Grap of Language Weaver informed attendees. I didn’t know that then, but now I do.

Expand Your Focus

Says Deane, “Conferences just open your eyes to the bigger picture. The day-to-day of your job often leaves you fighting fires all the time, and never looking further down the road. But listening to big thinkers for a couple of days who are more concerned with your industry as a whole than with your specific business in particular really helps you step back, get above the tree line, and consider the entire forest for a minute.

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Epiphanies can result.”

I remember 10 years ago listening to a keynote speaker at a translation convention in Montreal. He was not from the field of translation, but he sure had a knack for sharing business advice that applied directly to me. I remember him asking, “If you don’t have a website yet, what on earth are you waiting for?” I could not answer.

On the trip back home, I began planning mine. And because the speaker had given us a “do” and a “don’t” list, I was able to avoid errors that I still see others making today. I managed to register my own company’s domain name (anglocom.com), but I was too late to grab the domain I really wanted (anglo.com). Maybe if I had attended a conference a year earlier...

Networking Opportunities

This is the big one, Deane explains, and why, if you pick the right conference, you could almost go, not attend any sessions, and still get huge value out of it. The real value of a conference is often what happens *between* the sessions, and Deane says his experience bears this out. Mine does, too.

I remember a Brazilian Portuguese translator who introduced himself to me at ATA’s Annual Conference in Toronto in 2005. He was pleasant and businesslike, so I was sorry to tell him that as a single language provider, we never had the need for Brazilian Portuguese. I did, however, take his card.

Guess what happened the next

week? One of our regular clients called and asked if we knew anyone who did Brazilian Portuguese. My enterprising contact got the contract, we looked good to our client, and everyone was happy.

On a vacation trip to Buenos Aires a few years ago, a local translation company owner met us at our hotel with her husband and took us out for dinner to a typical Argentinean restaurant. Why? Because I had met her at an ATA event. Well, actually, that plus the fact that we had started doing business together. In a presentation at an ATA TCD mid-year conference the year before, she had very compellingly explained why we should offer Spanish translation and have it done in Argentina. We had dealt only in English and French up to that point, but meeting her opened my mind and created a new revenue stream for us. Today, I consider her my friend.

Great Morale Boosters

This last point depends on how much you travel, but traveling to conferences can be...fun. If you have not traveled for a while, it is a nice reason to get to experience a new city, go out in the evenings, and get thrust out of your geographic world for a little while. If you do not travel much, it can be a nice way to take a break.

Remember the Big Picture

So, there you have it: Deane Barker’s five benefits to attending conferences. When most people ➡

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go to a conference—especially their first few conferences—they expect nothing but skill-based learning. If that is all you want, book a training session or workshop or something. Conferences are often about the bigger picture, and if you take a step back and focus on that area, you can learn a lot more—and draw untold benefits for your career or business or both.

Notes

1. Gagetopia.com

<http://cmsreport.com/blogs/bryan>
Deane Barker's blog

2. Web Content 2009

<http://webcontentconferences.com>

ata



Looking for continuing education events in your area?

Check out ATA's online event calendar at
www.atanet.org/calendar.

Don't get hung out to dry Tips for cleaning up your online profile

A listing in ATA's online *Directory of Translation and Interpreting Services* or the *Directory of Language Services Companies* can be one of your most valuable member benefits.

Six Tips to Help You Make Contact

1. Check spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
2. Update your contact information, especially your e-mail address and phone numbers.
3. Use the "Additional Information" field, noting education and career experiences, unusual specialties, and any dialects you can handle. By using a "keyword" search, clients can find your services based on a set of very specific skills and experience.
4. List your areas of specialization.
5. Review your listing monthly to experiment with different wording or add new information that may set you apart from others.
6. List non-English-to-non-English language combinations, such as Portuguese into Spanish and French into Italian.

Make those updates online at www.atanet.org/onlinedirectories/update_profile.php.