6-3-2019

Quick Question: What About Conferences?

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TSLL TechScans

A Blog to share the latest trends and technology tools for Technical Services Law Librarians

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Conferences are a part of most of our jobs. Sometimes we are encouraged to pick one to attend annually, and others out there may have institutions with supervisors or directors that want you to attend as many as possible. Whether you have never attended a conference before, or you have attended many but this may be your first season in your current position, I hope these tips will help with navigating the perhaps uncomfortable terrain.

Tip #1: Dress appropriately, but comfortably.

I have attended a few local and regional conferences where at times I felt extremely underdressed and at other times way overdressed. The more I attend a specific conference the more I get a feel for the types of attire others wear and what that says about you in a session audience or an exhibit hall crowd. If you are presenting, of course you may want to dress it up a bit. If you are not, don't feel like you have to wear interview attire complete with hot blazers and the world's most uncomfortable shoes! Most conferences happen in the summer so keep that in mind. Bring a suitcase with a variety of options so you can change according to weather and building conditions (or as your sweat-levels increase from social interactions). If you have colleagues who have been to certain conferences before, ask them what they wear and how most people dress for it. Earlier this year I attended my first SEAALL (Southeastern Chapter of the American Association of Law Libraries). Although I had been to many conferences before, this was my first out of state conference as well as my first in my new librarian position. It was a smaller more compact crowd compared to others I had attended, and I quickly realized I had overdressed for this one. I was able to use that fact though as a conversation starter for post-conference email-networking! More on that experience in tip number four.

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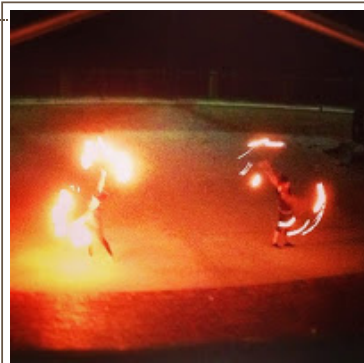
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Fall 2014, overdressed for my first ever conference.

Tip #2: Make your own schedule with your own goals.

I think it is safe to say that the overall goal for most librarian's conference attendance is professional development. I have found that I personally get the most out of a conference when I make my own schedule in advance, working in times for breaks and leisure. I haven't seen a conference yet which did not post the detailed schedule in advance. Print yourself a copy, highlight sessions you want to attend, and if there is a specific reason make notes to yourself as to why. Use your goals to determine which sessions you choose to attend. Some example goals I plan to use for an upcoming conference include: (A) Learn about something I know nothing about, (B) Learn more about something I am dealing with in my current job, (C) Meet two new people - more on this specific goal in tip number four too!

Tip #3: It is OK to leave a session early or to enjoy leisure time.

Even if your personal schedule that you crafted in advance has lead you astray, do not feel tied to it. If you attend a session that within the first 5 minutes is not what you expected, leave (politely, of course) and use the time for something else productive. Sometimes there are multiple sessions that sound interesting. If a certain block of time has a few, add a back-up to your schedule so you are not scrambling if you leave one early. There also

Fire dancers on the Savannah Riverwalk in Augusta, GA.

may be cases where not a single session in a given block of time is of interest. Take advantage of this time by visiting an exhibit hall, poster sessions, or just people watching to (hopefully) network with someone you haven't met before.

It is also OK to plan for down time. Take a nap! See the sights of the city, or enjoy free amenities at the hotel. It always surprises me how few people go swimming or enjoy the game room when staying at a hotel that has those things. Some conference schedules even include recommended activities more officially to encourage rejuvenation in attendees or to

make networking easier. Examples include a morning run, vendor-sponsored mixology classes, movie nights, or nature walks. Also, if you like taking pictures, take them! Photos of the location or interesting things you were able to see and do while away from the office can spice up your post-conference report once you are back at work - more on this in tip number five.

Tip #4: Networking doesn't have to be awkward.

The indoor spring-fed pool in Hot Springs, VA.

OK - so it definitely can be, and if you are like me it more than often is awkward (at least from my perspective, but don't assume other people think it is!). As an extrovert-imposter I identify much more with the introverts out there and have to really, really make it a measurable goal to speak to people I do not already know (which is like everyone basically). Taking advantage of some of those vendor sponsored activities, or participating in a dine around might help take some pressure off of initial introductions. People at these events tend to go for the purpose of meeting other people, so capitalize on that! Another easy way to introduce yourself is to politely approach a presenter after their session. Asking a follow-up question or just stating you enjoyed their session topic can be a more natural conversation starter and allow for brief introductions to be exchanged. Look for people that look like yourself, perhaps standing off in a corner or keeping the coffee station warm, and approach them with the "I really feel uncomfortable at things like this, how about you?" to start a conversation. Keep business cards with you just in case an opportunity arises from a conversation and you can exchange cards with someone. Don't feel like you should give a card to everyone you meet, but if you do exchange cards you can use those to keep a tally of who you met as evidence that you can do this! Two networking tips I heard at a recent conference delivered by an introverted presenter were to (A) set a numerical goal for how many people you want to meet, but keep it modest, and (B) check in with colleagues each day of the conference to talk about how many people you met - discussing with others can help you actually remember who you met and what they looked like so you don't draw a total blank when you see them again next (perhaps the very next day!). If you meet someone, however briefly, and you do not have the time to continue a conversation, follow up with an email. Emailing post-conference can be a lower-pressure form of networking that might actually go further for you than face-to-face chit chat. At a recent conference I wanted SO badly to compliment an acquaintance's outfit but I was too nervous to do it at the time. Less than a week later there was an opportunity by email where questions related to an organization required my response anyway. I seized that email-moment to continue our conference conversation and put the compliment out there. We ended up exchanging longer emails than I predicted about style of dress and within another week were Facebook friends! Networking can still be done effectively with baby-steps.

Fall 2017 at my fourth Georgia Libraries Conference I FINALLY took a photo with a former colleague who was also attending.

Tip #5: Don't overwork when at a work conference.

By this I mean do not promise to do too much away from the office while at a conference. Plan to check email once or twice a day (maybe work specific times into the schedule you are making for yourself!), but try to be present at the conference. This is a really hard one for me to put into practice because I am always thinking of the things I could or should otherwise be doing were I back at my office desk. Instead remind yourself that the conference IS work! If you have to, reframe the moments when you find yourself reaching for your phone or opening your laptop too frequently that once you return you will be expected (with some colleagues more than others) to give an informal or formal report on what you learned there, and how you or they can use what you have learned. It also helps me personally to be more present in sessions by taking notes or photos. Often a slide is shared with several great points, and taking a quick picture of it with my phone helps me capture more than I could in hand-written notes. Notes and pictures not only give me something more concrete to take back to work for sharing and discussions, but also helps channel that nervous energy when I start to think "I wish I was finishing that project at work instead!" or "How much catching up will I have to do because of this trip?". Feel confident that you ARE working, this IS a part of your job, and your employer wants YOU there at that moment. It always impresses me when others return from a conference and have photos and notes to share, and this can be a simple way to reinforce not just to others but to yourself that the trip was valuable, rewarding, and time well spent.

To Summarize: Plan in advance, soak in as much as you can, don't overthink it, and take care of yourself! If you are relaxed all aspects of the conference will flow more smoothly and naturally. Before you know it, it will be over, and you will be back at your desk crouching over work thinking "wasn't that a great break from this normal day-to-day?" Hopefully you will leave feeling refreshed and with new ideas to bring to the table!

What tips for conference-going do you wish someone had shared with you as a new librarian? Share them with us in the comments!

Posted by Rachel Evans at 10:48 AM