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Janet M. Brown
Valparaíso University

Nola A. Schmidt
Valparaíso University

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Getting the most out of

Conferences can help you gain new knowledge and expand your career opportunities, so take advantage of everything they have to offer.

conferences

By Janet M. Brown, RN, PhD, and Nola A. Schmidt, RN, CNE, PhD

BY ATTENDING CONFERENCES, you can learn about cutting-edge practices in your specialty, professional issues, and the latest research. You also have a chance to network with colleagues about career opportunities. Here are some guidelines for getting the most out of the conferences you attend.

Which one?

When selecting a conference, first consider these basic features: the conference's topic or theme, location, dates and length, and cost.

Most often, you'll choose a conference because of its **topic or theme**, which provides focus for the presentations. Your employer may send you to a conference that fits your facility's goals; for example, a hospital administrator may send several nurses to a conference to learn how to achieve Magnet hospital recognition. You may also select a conference because it offers continuing-education units that you need to renew your license.

Because one purpose of conference attendance is to learn best practices for patient care, your employer will likely expect you to share your findings after returning from the conference. Be prepared to provide a synopsis of conference highlights at a staff meeting, propose practice changes, or report to committees.

Location will influence your decision. Do you want to attend a conference in an interesting or exotic location, or do you want to stay close to home?

You'll also need to consider the **dates and length** of conferences. Plan ahead to ensure that you can fit the conference into your work schedule and that it won't conflict with family obligations.

Attending a conference can involve a significant **cost**, so

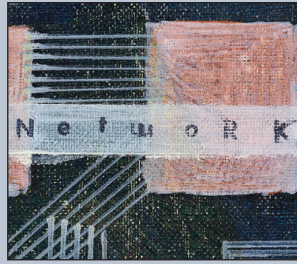
check your employee policies related to conference attendance. Some facilities will reimburse you under specified conditions—for example, you may need to be employed a certain length of time to be eligible. Some facilities specify a maximum number of conference days that you can allocate as work time. You'll probably have to secure approval before making arrangements, so inform your manager about how the program would enhance your professional status or effectiveness. Plan ahead because you may have to submit forms to apply for conference funding and wait for approval.

With sufficient notice, you may be able to obtain a cash advance from your employer to cover some conference expenses. But always consider alternative sources of funding because your facility may not cover 100% of conference costs.

Make arrangements

After selecting a conference, register early! Most conferences set limits on the number of registrants, and attendance fees may be lower if you register early. If you can, stay at the hotel where the conference is being held to make attending events easy. Hotel rooms tend to fill up quickly at large conferences, so make your reservations early. The host hotel may offer special conference room rates, but if funds are tight you may be able to find cheaper accommodations within walking distance.

Although some conference planners recommend which travel agencies to use, don't assume that travel agencies suggested by conference planners will offer better deals than you could find independently. Also, find out if your employer requires you to make arrangements through a specific agency. If traveling with a colleague, negotiate beforehand how you'll share accommodations such as rooms or rental cars.



First impressions are important, so arrive at conference sessions ahead of time, wear your name badge, and introduce yourself to others.

Your facility will likely require you to follow specific procedures to receive reimbursement of conference fees, travel, meals, and other costs. Check your facility's policies before leaving for the conference and be sure to gather all necessary receipts for reimbursement.

Don't forget to bring business cards to give to new acquaintances.

When you get there

Shortly after arriving at the conference, check in at the registration desk. Review the entire conference program and select which sessions you'd like to attend. Check out where the presentation rooms of the sessions you plan to attend are ahead of time so you won't miss anything. Knowing your schedule in advance will give you time to think of questions for presenters. If two presentations you'd like to attend are scheduled at the same time, you may be able to purchase a CD or audiotape of the presentation you've missed. If you're attending the conference with colleagues, split up and share information later.

Although attending a conference is time away from the workplace, don't consider it "time off." Maintain a professional demeanor at all times. Conference attendees usually wear business suits, skirts, or pantsuits; even if the conference is at a resort, wearing sweatpants or jeans isn't acceptable. Presentation rooms can vary in temperature, so dress in layers.

First impressions are important, so arrive at conference sessions ahead of time, wear your name badge, and introduce yourself to others. Begin a conversation by inquiring where someone is from or why she chose to attend this conference. By being friendly, you'll quickly find individuals with common interests. Facilitate future communication with new acquaintances by sharing business cards. After taking someone's business card, make a note about her and why the connection is important; this will refresh your memory when you return home.

During sessions

The purpose of sessions and presentations is to share information, so listen respectfully and don't converse with other attendees during presentations. Don't forget to turn off or silence your cell phone.

To facilitate accurate reporting to colleagues at home, gather any handouts offered at the presentation, such as abstracts or copies of PowerPoint slides. Make notes in the program margins during the presentation to help you

remember key points. If the presenter doesn't have a handout available, you can contact her later to have one sent.

During presentations, don't be a passive listener; actively engaging can help you understand the material better. Stimulate discussion at the end of a presentation by asking questions you identified when you first reviewed the abstract. Don't hesitate to express alternative views or ideas, but do so in a collegial manner.

Make the most of poster presentations

An important scholarly venue for disseminating evidence, poster presentations are a mainstay of professional conferences. They also provide an excellent opportunity for networking by fostering professional interactions among nurses who view them. Poster presenters are usually available during certain hours to discuss their research with attendees.

To make the most of a poster presentation, don't try to review every poster. Identify those that relate to patient care and organizational topics that interest you. Make a point of approaching poster presenters and asking a few questions about their presentations to begin the conversation—they're usually eager to talk about their work and will appreciate your interest. The presenters may have handouts containing additional information that isn't included on the poster. Offer your business card to poster presenters whose work you're interested in and be sure to obtain theirs.

Networking tips

Besides participating in poster sessions, visiting vendor exhibits and attending meals and breaks provide opportunities to meet new people or renew friendships. You may find that some of the most memorable exchanges of information occur during conversations in hallways or at receptions.

Specialty groups, universities, and vendors often host meals or receptions at conferences. Taking advantage of these opportunities can offset some meal-related expenses—and they're also valuable networking opportunities. Receptions provide an excellent forum for nurses from different settings to meet and exchange information. Keynote speakers and renowned experts also frequently attend receptions. Although you may feel a bit intimidated about approaching them, you're likely to find that they're gracious and pleased to speak with you about their work.

Vendor exhibits are a good way to learn about new technologies and products. Representatives are eager to talk with nurses about their products. Gather literature to bring back

ATTEND to get the most out of conferences

A: Analyze

- Read promotional conference materials to ensure a good fit with personal, professional, and organizational goals.
- Consider the location, date, and cost.
- Take advantage of continuing-education units.

T: Talk

- Discuss the availability of funding and time away with your manager.
- Encourage others to attend.
- Review employee travel policies and benefits.
- Know what's expected of you when you return.

T: Travel arrangements and preparation

- Register early.
- Stay at the conference hotel if possible.
- Add time to your trip to relax or sightsee.
- Increase cost-effectiveness by attending the entire conference.

E: Educate yourself

- Select oral and poster presentations by carefully reviewing the conference program in advance.
- Attend as many sessions as possible.
- Take notes on abstracts and handouts.
- Split up from colleagues.
- Identify questions in advance.
- At the end of the day, make notes and compare with colleagues.

N: Network

- Create standard phrases to introduce yourself and begin conversations.
- Be professional in dress and manner.
- Carry business cards at all times.
- Attend poster sessions.
- Make acquaintances by taking advantage of extra activities.
- Visit vendors to gather information.

D: Disseminate

- Fulfill your employer's expectations about disseminating information.
- Create opportunities to share your findings with colleagues.
- Share your knowledge while motivated by enthusiasm.
- Make materials available to colleagues.

to your facility and don't forget to pick up some fun, free promotional items too.

At the end of a conference day, review your notes or compare them with colleagues. Making notes while details are fresh in your mind is easier than waiting until you return home. Review the schedule for the next day; your interests may have changed since first making the schedule.

Although it can be tempting to skip conference sessions and networking opportunities to sightsee, shop, or spend time at the pool, it's a waste of time and money to attend a conference if you don't participate fully. If you receive finan-

cial assistance to attend the conference, you're ethically obligated to use the funding for its intended purposes.

Share the wealth

You'll return from the conference energized with new ideas and perspectives. Whether you're handing in a written report or giving a presentation in a staff-development session, gather your newfound knowledge and share it enthusiastically with your colleagues. ✧

Janet M. Brown is the dean and professor of nursing and Nola A. Schmidt is associate professor at the Valparaiso (Ind.) University College of Nursing.