

Making Conferences Work for You

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Fall is the perfect time to decompress and reflect on the successes and challenges you had during the last busy growing season. The down time in the greenhouse industry is limited, so it's critical that both time and information are managed to maximize your company's potential.

Conferences are a fantastic way to connect with the community of growers, distributors and retailers. After a busy growing season, conferences provide those necessary moments where you can refresh, connect and brainstorm with like-minded individuals in your industry.

What can conferences do for you?

Conferences provide the opportunity to connect with other wholesalers: to network, learn and expand your knowledge base. Aside from visiting other wholesalers, conferences are often the only opportunity to learn from the challenges and successes of others in the greenhouse industry.

At last count, there were more than a dozen North American-based conferences for the greenhouse/nursery industry in January alone. It's virtually impossible and doesn't make good business sense to attend them all. So how do you select which conference to go to? And what do you do once you're there?

Review your business plan

Before selecting which conference(s) to attend, take the time to review your business plan. If you haven't updated your plan in the past year, now is the time to do this. Take the time to reflect on what worked in the past year and the areas that you struggled in. Was there a particular crop that you had production issues with? Were you able to keep up with the market demand or did you have excess stock?

Review each area of your business from the seed or cutting to the retail store. Which areas were you successful in and where do you need to improve? Jot these items down.

Now take the time to select which of these goals you would like to achieve in the near future. Which of these areas would you like to expand on or improve in the upcoming year? If there's more than one goal you'd like to focus on, involve a few other team members who could work with you to achieve these goals.

In the greenhouse industry, there's a conference or workshop developed to respond and reflect on almost every experience. From improving growing techniques to expanding your market, there will be a perfect conference for your company. The key is to make sure you're attending the right conference for your company's specific needs. Seek out seminars and discussions that address an issue on which you'd like more information.

There are three primary reasons why people attend conferences:

- To inform others about their product/business/information
- To learn about someone else's product/business/information
- To meet others in the industry to form or reconnect with a network of similar-thinking individuals

What does your company want to accomplish by attending conferences this year? How do you plan on doing this?

Take out some paper or your laptop and write the goals on top of the page in bold writing. Now connect the dots. Type in which seminars, products and individuals can help you attain these goals.

Goal setting

Goals provide us with direction. Without goals, we can wander aimlessly, listening to different ideas, thoughts and images. We may become interested, but if we don't have a direction, all of our time and energy may be wasted. The key to being profitable is having a specific focus and following through with it. Goals will provide this to us.

According to Gary Latman, author of "The Motivational Benefits of Goal Setting," goals motivate, energize and inspire staff and management to be productive and increase a company's overall success. When we commit to a goal, we're focused on relevant, critical ideas that will broaden our business, instead of being distracted by irrelevant items that will have little to no impact on our business success. By focusing on where to commit our time and information, it provides us with a natural source of energy.

According to Latman, the most productive goals are challenging ones. When we choose to focus on a challenging goal, people naturally place more effort in accomplishing the goal and its success. Challenging goals will literally make you and your staff become more productive.

Connect the conference to the goal

Conferences are a great way to brainstorm and gather information that will help put your goal into action. Select specific seminars or workshops that will work with your goal. When attending the seminar, keep the goal at the top of your mind. One suggestion is to write the goal on the top of your notebook. For example, "discover new ways on how altering temperatures can control the flowering time of bedding plants." While you're attending the seminar, write down any ideas that would directly relate to your concern.

This focus also will help you better attend to the information in the seminar and ensure the actual workshop is productive.

After the seminar, continue to gather information on temperature techniques. Talk to fellow greenhouse growers and discover what worked (or didn't work) for others in your industry. Share your findings with others as well and build your business network.

If there's more than one individual from your company attending the conferences, separate your goals and maximize the information potential of the conference. By the end of the day, you'll have strategies and techniques that you can apply to a variety of areas in your business.

Expand your network

Are there any individuals you would like to get to know better? If so, start networking before the conference. Email, tweet or connect with this individual through social networks and make a plan to physically meet at the conference. Explain to the individual what you would like to speak about—perhaps you've read a recent article on how they've developed a new breed of plants or incorporated an advanced water system.

Conferences are an integral stepping-stone for comparing options and discovering what's out there; however, without clear goals and an action plan this information is quickly lost. Take some time today to develop a concrete plan for your business and incorporate conferences as a critical tool to achieve your goal and accelerate your business success. **GT**

Anne-Marie Hardie is a freelance writer who has grown up in the greenhouse industry. At Bradford Greenhouses, Bradford (Barrie), Ontario, Anne-Marie has seen firsthand how knowledge and connections from conferences can both expand and change a wholesale business.