

Maximizing a Conference's Profit Potential

| Anne-Marie Hardie

>> Published Date: 9/26/2012

Making the decision to attend a conference is a significant investment in both the company's time and money. Way too often we attend the conferences with the best intentions, but fail to make use of any of the information we learned. Why does this happen? And is there a way to make our conference attendance not only productive, but also profitable?

Absolutely.

In order to maximize the benefits from a conference, choose one that complements the goals of your business. Take the time to match the conference to your company's goals. In the greenhouse industry, there's truly a conference for everyone, from reviewing climate control systems to introducing new plant varieties.

According to David Allen, author of "Getting Things Done," having a clear purpose will ensure that your goals are achieved. "Purpose defines success," states Allen. "It's the primal reference point for any investment of time and energy ..." Attending a conference with a clearly defined purpose is the key to increasing productivity and profit.

Process the information

Failing to set aside time to review the conference information is perhaps the main reason that a conference quickly becomes a waste of both your company's time and money. How does this happen?

Perhaps you've just returned from a fantastic conference. You may be energized by the people you met and the fantastic information/products you've discovered. In your hands is a bag brimming full of goodies that you can't wait to dive into. However, as soon as you return to work, there's a to-do list a mile long and that bag sits in the corner.

There may be a moment or two where you will sift through the wealth of pamphlets, brochures and business cards you collected. However, the majority of paper gets left behind. Months later, the material gets tossed as does all that money and time that you invested in the conference. Does this sound familiar?

As hard as it may feel to do, set aside time to review the material from the conference. Make this time commitment before you even leave for the conference. Take out your calendar and block out a few hours to sit down and sift through the material. If you can't afford to allocate a large chunk of time, break it into small increments. Setting aside even 20 minutes a day will ensure the information you learned from the conference is used and not wasted. But what do you do in the time you've allotted?

Review and discuss the material

Did you attend a workshop in the last conference? If so, how did you take down notes? Ideally, you would have used a digital recorder or received a detailed handout from the seminar. However, it's more likely that you spent the workshop scribbling down notes while trying to listen and be part of the discussion process.

If you've left a meeting with scribbles in hand, take a few moments to read and rewrite (if necessary) the material. Transcribe your notes as early as you possibly can. The longer you wait to transcribe the information, the more challenging it will be. Unless you're a professional transcriber, most notes will have several holes in them—particularly in the areas that you're most interested in. This sounds counter intuitive, but when we're paying attention to a speaker, it's difficult to take down detailed notes. As a result, your notes may read like an accumulation of unfinished thoughts. By reviewing and amending the notes when the information is fresh, you can easily fill in these blanks.

But don't stop here!

Once this is complete, interweave any comments and ideas you have right into your notes.

Highlight the main features of the workshops and any actions you intend to do with this information. Perhaps you learned about a new greenhouse shade system. Jot down the aspects that most interested you about this system and your action plan: Contact vendors, get product information, etc.

Connect with others

Maximize your conference networks by connecting with other individuals who attended the workshop. Share your highlights with others and work together to brainstorm ideas. There's something about connecting with an individual that increases productivity. These contacts may help answer

any questions you may have and be able to provide some additional ways you can apply the information from the workshop.

Make the most of these brainstorm sessions. For each session, have a specific goal you'll discuss and end each session with an action plan for each individual. It's too easy to get distracted in meetings; setting these specific goals ensures the meeting is both focused and productive.

Get out your business plan

A great way to maximize the profit potential from the conference is to directly link it into your business plan. Take out your plan and brainstorm how the material you learned in the conference can directly grow and assist your business. What are the goals you want to achieve in the next two months, six months and year? Now what workshops, ideas and products can help you achieve these goals?

Having a clear view of what your goals are is the most effective way to ensure these goals are met. Goals should always be at the forefront of our mind. If these goals are not visual, they're easily forgotten. Make your business goals an integral part of your every day life.

Sift through the information

You have your goals in place. Now is the time to pull out that bag of goodies and sift through the information. Allow yourself a few hours to go through it. Don't waste your time and money by leaving the information in a bag.

Pinpoint any pamphlet, business card or idea that can directly apply to your business goals. Separate this information into clearly labeled folders with action plans on each. Do you require additional information? Do you need to connect with an individual or order the product? Now is the time to do this.

Eliminate the information overload

Is your bag still full? If so, quickly go through the remaining information and separate it into three piles: "Use it," "Maybe" and "Toss it." Be meticulous. If you don't see a need for the information, get rid of it. Eliminate paperwork that doesn't apply to your business.

Now pick up the "Use it" pile. If you applied the goal-setting technique, this pile should be fairly small. Carefully look at this information. Should it be integrated into one of your current goals? If so, take the information and integrate it now.

Is there another goal that wasn't in your business plan? Do you have room to work on this goal now? Or is it something that can be done in the near future? The key to profiting from this information is integrating clear goals into an action plan.

Now take the "Maybe" pile. Spend some time reflecting why this information is in this pile. Do you need some additional information? If so, request it now. Is it a piece of information you're interested in applying in future years? If so, file this information in a folder labeled "Future Possible Ideas" and review it again in six months.

Build and maintain your networks

Aside from information, conferences give us the unique opportunity to get "face time" with others in the industry. Take the time after the conference to quickly build your business networks. Use whatever social networks you're currently using and connect with your colleagues. Make a conscious effort to connect on a regular basis. You never know what new product or piece of information someone may have discovered. Maintaining these social networks will open the door for this information sharing. **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.