



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Get the Biggest Bang for Your Buck

It's conference time again. Over a period of the next four or five months, most fire service organizations will be holding their annual conferences. Some will be small and sparsely attended; others will be bigger and better than ever. In all cases, the participants may or may not get the biggest bang for their buck.

Chances are you will be attending one of those conferences. It's likely you'll attend in anticipation of getting new information or insight into how to better operate your fire department. The degree of success in achieving this objective depends on two things: how well the conference planners have put the program together and how well you plan to use the information you receive.

Attendance at a conference is no guarantee of satisfaction. Attending conferences is similar to the old cliché about experience. Some people have twenty years experience. Others have one year's experience twenty years in a row. The same applies to conferences. There are some individuals who attend conferences years after year and bring back absolutely nothing of value to their organization. There are others who bring back a treasure chest from even the smallest of conferences.

One has to have a plan to attend a conference. Not just travel plans-getting to the location and the comfort factors of where you're staying. Although an essential part of attendance satisfaction, it's by no means the barometer of a conference's value to you as a fire chief.

There are at least three phases to conference success: pre-conference planning, on-site participation and after conference follow through. Pre-conference planning is much more important than the credit it's given. In fact, most individuals consider pre-conference planning to consist of signing up for registration.

Before you decide to attend a specific activity or event, there are several things that should go through your mind in selecting a conference. First, what is the track record of the conference in previous years? If it has a reputation of being a social event and lacking substantial content, yet the program has merit, then pre-conference planning becomes even more important. You should look at the program carefully. Identify the activities and events that relate directly to specific problems you are dealing with within your organization. A little research conducted on the merits of the individual speakers can be valuable. In some cases, conferences do not identify who the main speakers are going to be. In that case, you have to gamble along with everyone else. However, if they do identify speakers, it's not unreasonable for you to do a little advanced planning by checking on their credentials and even making personal contact with them.



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If the speaker is already published in fire publications, it may be desirable to go back and re-read some of the articles to find out what of philosophy these individuals have or to contact the conference or program planner to determine where this individual has spoken on the same topic before.

It's also a good idea to devise a conference kit. Many people arrive at a professional activity with absolutely nothing in their hands except for the registration forms. They often miss out on some of the opportunities of acquiring new information because they are ill-prepared to deal with it. A conference kit might consist of a tape recorder, your own clipboard or notebook, an adequate supply of business cards and an extra expandable file folder or carry bag. I also know several conference attendees who take along a small pocket type camera and several rolls of film to document ideas they see in the exhibit areas.

Once you arrive on-site, you enter phase two of maximizing the experience. Immediately go to conference headquarters and determine if the activities and events are being professionally tape recorded. This is especially valuable if you have a conference large enough to have parallel tracks of activity. It's almost impossible to be all places at all times and it's not uncommon for two very good speakers to be scheduled simultaneously on the program. Discretionary acquisition of these tapes can often leverage your opportunity to be at a conference.

Secondly, it's a good idea to link up with someone who has the same philosophical orientation as yourself. A little bit of cross-fertilization of desires of speaker attendance can often result in parallel tracks being covered quite adequately by two individuals who are willing to share notes and information. Once you have a copy of the actual schedule, it's a good idea to find yourself a quiet place, either at the registration area or in a coffee lounge and use a highlighter to go through and prepare an hour by hour schedule of your activities. Once again, this is a phase often overlooked. Many individuals feel it's appropriate to sample many activities rather than stay in one location. Unfortunately, it almost always results in a form of mediocrity. A person who goes from session to session without a game plan usually only gets a small segment out of each.

The next suggestion is one with which many people find difficulty complying. It has to do with your actual participation in a workshop or seminar. If possible, don't sit next to someone you already know. While this is comfortable, and in some cases a function of the layout of the classroom, you should make a conscious effort at conferences to meet people with which you don't share a common knowledge. Be prepared to look around to see who you haven't had the opportunity to interact with before. Some people find this quite difficult, especially if they're introverted. But one of the greatest values of attending conferences is to be found in the knowledge and experiences of the other participants. Failure to make new acquaintances only assures you will hear the same war stories generated in previous conferences. Be prepared to hand out your business cards freely. Be prepared to accept business cards



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freely and, more importantly, when you accept a new business card identify what the individual's interests are and what you might possibly be able to share with them in the future.

Of course one of the obvious suggestions is to maximize availability of information handed out by instructors. It's surprising the number of people who fail to pick up handouts at the front of rooms after workshops are completed. Unless one is on a very tight time schedule, it's a good idea after a workshop is completed to wait around for a few moments. In many cases, the extra handouts that were provided are going to end up in a trash can. This is an opportunity for you to gather one or two extra copies which you can then distribute to members of your staff upon return home.

An even more important opportunity could be taken to talk to the instructor upon completion of the workshop. While you're usually given an opportunity to ask questions during presentations, the after workshop participation is a little more specific. Introduce yourself to the instructor. Get acquainted with him. If you found areas of common interest, be willing to share your card with him and express your interest in his field of expertise. You may be surprised to find the instructor will provide you with follow-up information totally unsolicited.

Phase three of conference success is also one which is commonly overlooked. As you pack your bags to leave the hotel, your mind automatically shifts to the pile of paperwork that will be sitting on your desk Monday morning. If you're like most conference attendees, you will probably have the feeling more information was exchanged during the lunch breaks, coffee breaks, cocktail hours and in hospital rooms than in the workshops. Most attendees suffer from a case of systems overload. There is such a sensory spectrum at conferences that often facts and new information is overwhelmed by the more visceral experiences of being there. That's why it's important to have a quiet time to review what was acquired during the conference.

After returning from the event, there are at least three things which will assist you in gaining leverage from participation. First, you should share your newly acquired information with other members of the organization instead of putting it all in a cardboard box or in the bottom of a file drawer. Information passed out at conferences, especially advertisements and brochures are usually going to be obsolete within the next 12 months. There is little use in saving them. They should be marked up and sent to other staff members. Most of us have subordinates, even if we're dealing with volunteer organizations. That information should be distributed for their use.

Second, it's not a bad idea to go back and look at your conference sessions and do a critique. Rating the sessions in your own mind will allow you to focus on which one contributes the most to your own potential. If you arrange your experiences in a hierarchy of contributions to your knowledge base, you can often discount some material as a waste of your time. On the other hand, if you pick one or two



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good ideas out of every conference and make them work for you, your experiences can be effectively put to use.

Third, it's time to organize the material you acquired in an orderly fashion so it can be retrieved in the event something arises later, One common practice that I use is to take all the information and handouts I have retained and place them in a file folder or envelope labeled with the name of the event. Most of us have fairly good memories when it comes to remembering where we were first exposed to information. By filing the topic by the event, you are further aided in recall by being able to relate the new information to the other experiences of the conference.

All of us have our fond memories of conferences and seminars. The camaraderie and brotherhood associated with these events is an essential part of the professional fire service and should be preserved. However, we will be unable to sustain professional gatherings of our type unless they result in improved performance and heighten our credibility at home. Ask yourself one question: What portion of our budgets is almost always cut when there is a budget crunch? The answer is travel and training, if we maximize our potential at home.