

How to Justify Conference Attendance

By Mike Doyle

As a manager you may often be faced either with your own need to attend a professional conference or requests by your team members to attend one. Professional conferences can be expensive and not all budget managers understand their importance or the benefits derived by conference attendees. In this article, Mike Doyle discusses how to go about justifying the expense of attending a conference and provides some handy worksheets you can use to do so.

As a manager, how do you propose any allocation of resources in your organization? You need to understand two components to make decisions:

- Expense (the investment)
- Return on Investment

This article provides some easy-to-use tools to help you calculate the investment and identify your return.

Understanding Your Conference Expenses

Conference expenses are affected by a number of factors. Before you can even begin to justify conference expenses, you need to calculate what those expenses are. To do so, use the following *Expenses Worksheet* to develop a cost estimate for attending your selected conference.

Expenses Worksheet

| <u>Expense</u> | <u>Guideline</u> | <u>Cost</u> |
|---|--|-------------|
| Conference Registration | | \$ |
| Pre & Post Conference Class Registration (if applicable) | Usually optional | \$ |
| Materials Fees (if any) | Books? Software? Media? | \$ |
| Flight | Airline websites | \$ |
| Lodging | Conferences usually have Special rates with the hotel | \$ |
| Transportation: Airport to hotel & back | If flying: Taxi? Car rental? | \$ |
| Mileage Reimbursement | To conference or to airport & return | \$ |
| Parking Reimbursement | For flight or at hotel | \$ |
| Food Per Diem | Your Agency's policies | \$_____ |
| | Subtotal | \$ |
| Multiply by number of employees attending | | #_____ |
| | Total cost (may not need mileage & parking reimb for all employees) | \$ |

Understanding the Benefits

Let's face it: many benefits from conference attendance are hard to quantify. For example, many experts agree that the top benefit of conference attendance is networking value. Where else can

you find so many industry contacts facing the same issues as your organization? Are there solutions you're not aware of?

Although networking is undoubtedly the most important aspect of a conference, it is also the toughest for which to quantify any value.

On the other hand, if an employee came to you and said, "I want you to fund me for \$4000 and I don't know what it'll do for you," then you would likely scoff at the offer...and maybe even mumble a few colorful metaphors about his/her suggestion.

When you propose a conference for approvals, don't focus on how much you want to go; *focus on what you will specifically bring back to the organization as payback for the investment.*

Some specific details you'll need to identify include:

- Session content. What sessions have particular relevance to your organization's work? Specifically identify:
 - * Tools (authoring tools, content management systems, etc.)
 - * Technologies (XML, DITA, etc.)
 - * Processes (structured writing, single-sourcing, etc.)
- Vendor contacts. Will the conference showcase vendors with tools you use or are evaluating for potential future use? Is this an opportunity during which you'll be able to compare competing tools?
- Best practices. Will there be training sessions in areas that will immediately benefit your group?
- Training. Will there be workshops designed to teach attendees a special skill and/or help your team overcome current or future challenges?

Quantifying the Benefits

Although you might understand the benefits of the conference that interests you, your manager may not. Therefore, to be most effective in justifying the conference, you need to clearly articulate the connection between your organization's knowledge requirements and the conference program. DO NOT assume that your manager will be able to automatically make those distinctions.

To support this process, use *Benefits Worksheet* below to help you focus on the benefits. Use whatever makes sense for your particular organization and conference, and omit the rest.

It's All in the Selling

After you have identified the specific knowledge benefits, you've provided both the expenses & benefits your manager needs to decide the value of your proposition.

Salespeople work the same way. They don't let customers infer the value of what they are selling, they make that leap for them.

Sell your conference proposition!

About the Author

Mike Doyle has been in the technical documentation & training business for almost 25 years, as a manager, author, teacher, & conference organizer. He founded the Documentation & Training Conference (www.doctrain.com). Reprinted with permission of www.writingassist.com

Benefits Worksheet

Your Organization's Benefits

**be sure to change these topics to fit your agencies needs*

Specific Needs & the Sessions That Meet the Need

Networking Benefits

This conference will allow (specific team members) to network with other professionals & vendors in the industry. We will be able to take the pulse of what is happening for tools, technologies, & processes & hear ideas we weren't even aware of.

Teambuilding (if sending a group)

This conference will help build our team, providing a forum for team members to discuss tools, technologies, & processes & how we might apply them in our company to improve our information products, workflow, & processes.

Current Tools

Future Tools Exploration

Current Technologies

Future Technologies Exploration

Current Processes

Future Processes Exploration

Vendors with Tools & Technologies That You Are Exploring