

How to Justify Conference Attendance

by Mike Doyle

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

Expense	Guideline	Cost
Conference Registration		\$
Pre & Post-Conference Class Registration, if applicable	usually optional	\$
Materials Fees (if any)	books? software? media?	\$
Flight	try a Web travel service to get a quick estimate	\$
Lodging	conferences usually have special rates with hotel	\$
Transportation: Airport to Hotel	if flying: taxi? car rental?	\$
Transportation: Hotel to Airport	if flying: taxi? car rental?	\$
Mileage Reimbursement	driving to conference? To the airport for your flight? Use Mapquest to calculate distances	\$
Parking Reimbursement	at airport for flight departure, or at hotel where conference is	\$

	located	
Food Per Diem	Remember, most include breakfast, lunch, & breaks	\$
subtotal		\$
total number of employees going		
= total		\$

Understanding the Benefits

Let's face it: many benefits from conference attendance are hard to quantify. For example, 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 \$4,000 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 the following *Benefits Worksheet* to help you focus on the benefits. Use whatever makes sense for your particular organization and conference, and omit the rest.

Benefits Worksheet

Your Organization's Benefits	Specific Needs and the Conference Sessions & Training that Meet the Need
Networking Benefits	This conference will allow [specific team members] to network with other professionals and vendors in the industry. We will be able to take the pulse of what is happening for tools, technologies, and processes, and hear ideas we weren't even aware of.
Teambuilding (if sending a big part of your group)	This conference will help build our team, providing a forum for team members to discuss tools, technologies, and processes and how we might apply them in our company to improve our information products, workflow, and processes.
Current Tools	
Future Tools Exploration	
Current Technologies	
Future Technologies Exploration	
Current Processes	
Future Processes Exploration	
Vendors With Tools & Technologies You Are Exploring	

It's all in the Selling

After you have identified the specific knowledge benefits, you've provided both the expenses and 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