



7 Tricks to attending a conference on someone else's dime

Professional Development Series by Laura Lee Rose
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Hello, this is Laura Lee Rose – Corporate Exit Strategist for the Blooming Entrepreneur – and I am a business and life coach that specializes in time management, project management and work-life balance strategies. As a success and business coach, I encourage continuous learning and sharpening our skills. But with our aggressive work schedules, how does one find the time for self-study? How can one stay ahead of the next generation technology?

One effective way to stay aligned with budding technology and trends is to attend IT and Computer Science Conferences. Unfortunately in today's economy, many companies are cutting back on travel and conference expenses. Below are 7 tricks to increase your chances of attending a conference on someone else's dime.

- 1) Become a speaker at a conference
- 2) Volunteer at a conference
- 3) Staff the sales or demo booth
- 4) Setup client meetings at or near the conference
- 5) Commit to bring back 50 sales leads
- 6) Conduct off-site User Group meeting in that conference city
- 7) Schedule client visits to plants close to the conference site.

The bottom line is to increase your value by combining your attendance with other company-valued activities.

Let's take them one by one.

Become a speaker at a conference

This isn't as difficult as it seems. Conferences normally have open calls for papers and presentations. Create 4 or 5 quick abstracts for various topics. You don't really need to have the papers fully written. A quick outline is enough to capture the reviewers' attention. When one of your abstracts is selected, you will have several months to create that hour presentation. Once your paper is accepted, most companies will send you to it.

If your company still refuses, contact the host of the conference. Most conferences have discretionary budgets to assist with selected speaker's expenses.

Note: Being accepted is a numbers game. Therefore, to increase your chances at being accepted, send your abstracts to several conferences and submit different titles to different tracks. For instance, come up with an abstract and title for: the development track; the testing track; the project management track; and the general track. Sometimes a conference will receive many submissions in one area but not in all areas. You can't predict which track will be 'submission light' but there will be a track with fewer submissions than all the others. It logically follows that the fewer submission in a track, the higher your chances.

Volunteer at a conference

Contact the conference host or professional organization and offer your services. Most conferences will get many volunteering offers. Therefore, the key here is to be an active member or committee member of that professional organization or association. Networking is key. If you are considered a valued member of their organization throughout the year, they are more likely to sponsor your trip.

Staff the sales or demo booth

Offer to staff your company sales and demo booth. This is very effective if you already have a paper accepted. If you illustrate that you will make effective use of your time at the conference, you are more likely to be sent.

Setup client meetings at or near the conference

Compose a list of your clients that are either attending the conference or located near the conference city. Propose that you will conduct one-on-one client advocacy and feedback meetings with those clients. Most companies budget face-to-face client meetings to enhance and build good business relationships. This is an economical way to cover this goal.

Commit to bring back 50 sales leads

Even though we are in the IT department, the company goal is to make money. One of the best ways to illustrate that you not only understand this, but can help the bottom line is to bring back sales leads. Define a goal for yourself and commit to bring back a significant number of contacts. Some ways to do this:

- Pass email-signup sheet at your presentation
- Raffle or give away a door prize at your presentation or booth
- Attend other presentations and collect business cards
- Network at afterhours receptions and Bird-of-a-Feathers discussions
- Visit other companies' booths and collect their information
- Pick up company brochures and newsletters which may have additional staff directories.

Most of these will be "cold-leads". Highlight and separate those that have truly expressed interest in your company. Work with your sales staff to understand the target client description, so that you can bring back better leads.

Conduct an off-site User Group meeting in that conference city

Most IT companies hosts user group meetings. Check to see if your company has a user group residing in the conference city. Offer to host a special meeting for that specific group. Give your presentation to that user group outside of the conference. Use this time to get client feedback on certain products and services. Announce upcoming releases and promotions. Bring feedback back to your usability and focus groups.

Schedule client visits to plants close to the conference site.

Investigate which clients are near the conference site. Schedule a client on-site visit. Clients enjoy it when developers show this level of interest. They will open the labs and show you exactly how they are using your product. You will come away with an in-depth understanding of the client's pain and usage scenarios.

When you return, give an executive report about your client visit.

Conclusion:

Add value to all your actions. Expand your vision to reach beyond your individual team or group. When you attend a conference, not only bring back training materials for the rest of your IT group but bring something of substance back to sales, marketing, usability teams, business analysts and your executives. Before you attend your next conference, actually define significant artifacts for each company division. By following through on these assets it will be much easier to attend your next conference, because everyone will see the exponential merit of sending **you**.

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