

Marketing Matters



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The very first conference I attended was in October of 1990, only two years before my own first conference presentation. It was a Direct Marketing conference in Chicago, and I went mainly because spending three days in Chicago sounded much better than anything else I could be doing at the time. What did catch me off guard, however, as just how much I learned: For starters, Mary Kay Ash was the keynote speaker—and she was as terrific a speaker as she was an entrepreneur. But I also met many more interesting people, and came home with an enormous stack of materials that ended up being useful for no less than a decade. Most importantly, I started thinking about ideas I'd already had in new ways, and seeing ordinary things from a new perspective. In the end, the experience far exceeded my expectations. Since that time I've even paid out-of-pocket a couple of times to attend conferences I considered important and valuable, and every time I got my money's worth.

The HOPE of Wisconsin fall conference is taking place in Eau Claire next month, and I, for one, can't wait. If you've never been a presenter at this conference, you might wonder what it's like to be at the podium. If you're good, you often get complimentary comments from the attendees. If you're bad, you get to be at the receiving end of Melanie Ramey's wrath. I never want to find out what exactly that entails, so I always prepare my presentations with great care. In fact I'm always grateful to be working with people who have high standards, and that includes both the conference organizers and you, the audience. For me success is not measured by whether you've laughed at my occasional joke instead of my haircut, but by whether you've walked away feeling that I didn't waste your time. Speakers must always be respectful of their audience's time: If people bothered to show up, they must walk away having learned something new, having been reminded of something important, or having looked at something common in an uncommon way. Even if every presentation you attend isn't everything you expected, all it takes is one or two great sessions to make it all worthwhile.

Yet conferences are really not about the speakers. They're about an exchange of ideas and experiences; they're about building new relationships, catching up with friends and colleagues, and learning things you can share with your co-workers. We talk an awful lot about networking in the context of referrals, but networking with colleagues is at least as useful. It's an opportunity to talk about the challenges we face, and how others have dealt with them; it's an opportunity to

share best practices, and—why not—seek out areas in which we can collaborate, pool resources, and reap joint benefits. It's an opportunity to build personal relationships that are invaluable, and it's an opportunity to realize that we are, in fact, the HOPE of Wisconsin; not just its members, but its essence, its purpose, and its very strength.

The realization that even the social events and evening receptions are actually meaningful and important comes as great relief to me, as I used to think that if there's a cash bar around all things useful have pretty much wrapped up for the day. Yet if you were lucky enough to be at the Portraits of Hope reception last year, you were probably touched, impressed, and perhaps inspired to bring the display to your own hospice or community. For me, even that event alone was worth the trip to the conference. This year's program seems at least as promising, with great art, special guests, and there's clearly a lot to look forward to.

One of my favorite things to point out at conferences, especially to those who find my own presentation interesting or useful or both, is that the majority of their colleagues were not there to hear it. And that's a great shame, since organizational change doesn't happen unless many key people in the organization share common goals and ideas. Conferences cost money to attend, and my parents made it a point to inform me long ago (and multiple times) that it doesn't grow on trees. Only when I got older did I realize how fortunate that is for inflation. Coming to a conference may involve a cost, but being a Marketing expert I prefer to look at value rather than just cost itself: A full cost benefit analysis is always more informative than the answer to "how much?"

The economic value of the HOPE conference in particular is simply astounding: As my last column pointed out, it's important to seek out experts (whose credentials you've meticulously checked) to provide services that you don't have the time or means to do in-house. True experts don't come cheap, but it makes a lot more economic sense to hire them than not, because their services are too valuable to forego. The HOPE Fall Conference is inexpensive to attend even relative to most other conferences I know of, and yet it provides access to several experts, exposes you to an array of different topics, and provides a unique forum for learning about new trends, regulatory changes, strategies for growth, as well as exchanging ideas. The costs dwarf the benefits, and it's the kind of conference I still wish everyone on your staff could attend.

Perhaps you're thinking that I'm starting to sound like a commercial, but I only wish this column came with a lucrative contract! Consider it instead an unsolicited endorsement of something I really believe in: The HOPE Fall Conference is a great opportunity whether you're a social worker, a nurse, a chaplain, a hospice director, a volunteer; it offers multiple sessions on relevant, important topics, a chance to meet new colleagues and catch up with old friends, and a chance to do that inexpensively in only a couple of days' time. It's not where you send an ambassador from your hospice; it's where you send every employee with a pulse who can be spared for a day or two! Your attendance will not be a mere show of support for the HOPE of Wisconsin; it will give you an active, engaged role in an organization that is your advocate, your resource, your ally, your public face; it will yield direct benefits for your own hospice, and give you renewed strength and insight to strive for excellence in a national environment that's not getting any easier to operate in. Are you still thinking about it? I'm already packed. See you there!