

Don't Just Sit There... LEARN!



By **Robert C. Harris, CAE**
The NonProfit Center

It's true of so many things, but especially seminars and conferences: You get out of them what you put into them. To encourage attendees to make the most of your association's educational opportunities, share these 13 tips to maximize the benefits of attendance. (You'll probably even profit from the suggestions yourself.)

- Before you ever sit down at the conference, determine what you want to learn. Prepare by picking the right sessions for you, reading speaker bios, and anticipating some of the content and what you hope to find out.
- Find the best seat. Arrive early so you can find a spot you're comfortable in. To avoid distractions, sit near the front. If the handouts are on the table when you arrive early, scan them for content so you'll be better able to follow the presentation.
- Sit next to someone you don't know. Stay apart from the people with whom you came. Make new friends. Look for a potential mentor, customer, or contact. During the breaks, make a point of meeting at least one new person.
- Turn off distractions. Put away your calendar, Blackberry, newspaper, and trade journals so you can really focus on the presentation. Don't worry about anyone else; concentrate on becoming the best you can be for yourself.
- Listen with the intent to really learn and improve yourself. Pay attention specifically for one or two good ideas from every session. The best way is to take notes and be quiet. At the end of the day you may have a dozen new facts, resources, and inspirations. Sometimes you have to hear the entire presentation before you understand the original concepts. Don't cut off the thought or start critiquing too soon.
- Don't be a know-it-all. When you hear a familiar fact, don't tell yourself, "I already knew that." Rather, ask yourself, "How good am I at that?" Self-evaluation is one of the keys to self-improvement. Pick out what will work for you and concentrate on applying the new and relevant information.
- Turn down your sensitivity meter. You're attending to get information, not to be offended by a remark or word. Don't expect everything to be politically correct. Don't criticize the presenters; instead, help them make dynamic presentations by listening and nodding your head when you agree or by asking good questions.
- Ask good questions. Do so silently to yourself, or write them down as they occur to you so you can ask at the appropriate moment. Question to learn, not to show off in front of colleagues.
- Take good notes. You'll lose great ideas before you ever have a chance to try them if 1) you dash them off illegibly, 2) you never bother to read them when you get back to your office, or 3) you didn't take any. Write notes as if you've been asked to read them at your next staff meeting. You probably won't do that, but do share the "idea-gems" you learn with at least one other person.
- Be open to new seeds of wisdom. By keeping an open mind, you may hear something that can change your approach to a project or motivate you to expand your interests. But if you don't hear the information you want most during the session, stay a minute or two afterward and ask the speaker if you can talk or exchange e-mails later on.
- Don't stop learning just because you're in the hallways or trade show aisles. Not everything is taught from the podium. Keep your notebook in hand and ask questions of the people you meet outside the formal sessions. If exhibitors are present, the information they provide and their handouts might give you new ideas and facts.
- Contact the meeting's sponsors. They have a decided purpose for participating in the conference. Recognize the sponsors, thank them, find out what's new with them and what they might be able to do to help you.
- Finally, apply new concepts and information not just to your job but also to your personal life. If you let it, what you learn can add value to many areas of life beyond the office.

Reprinted with permission from Robert C. Harris, CAE; chairman of the Nonprofit Center in Tallahassee, Florida. www.nonprofitcenter.com

 **SDDS 31ST ANNUAL MIDWINTER CONVENTION & EXPO**

