# How to Evaluate a Conference

This document provides a map of how I approach the task of evaluating conferences. It is organized around the three main stakeholders to a conference.

- attendees
- exhibitors
- sponsors

**Attendees**

Knowledge transfer and networking People attend conferences to acquire technical and business information, and to find out about useful products and services. They also go to network. With respect to the first two objectives it is important to make a distinction between two types of knowledge. *Instrumental* knowledge is knowledge that is put to use in some reasonably well defined and specific manner. *Conceptual* knowledge is knowledge that has an impact on how people think about issues, but does not have a direct obvious impact on a specific action.

Context determines how knowledge is used. Take the case of learning about the costs, specifications, and uses of social networking applications in an organization. Imagine that I am not under pressure to do social networking in my company, and thus do not use the information for any immediate purpose. Time passes. Costs and specifications change. A potential for social networking arises. The aged information cannot be directly applied, but it did contribute to my belief that social networking may be feasible for my company, and how to go about setting it up.

Unless evaluation assesses both kinds of knowledge acquisition, the true value of the meeting cannot be known. Its hard to quantify the value of conceptual knowledge, but it is possible to get a general sense of how much such knowledge transfer took place during a meeting. Judgments about the impact of a conference would be misleading without this information.

With respect to the numerous informal interactions that take place during conferences, another distinction comes into play -- getting to know people, and knowledge transfer. The latter is important because it is quite possible that the most important information learned at a meeting came from informal conversations.

Attendees expectations: An important dimension of conference evaluation must be how it met expectations from the point of view of the attendee. No matter what the stated reason for a meeting, people bring a unique set of interests and needs to such events. There are three reasons why it is important to evaluate a conference from the users' point of view.

- The knowledge is useful for planning other meetings. As an example, organizers may think the reason for a meeting is to make people aware of how to use social networking with customers. Perhaps, though, many attendees saw the meeting as a convenient way to learn about social networking in general, regardless of their intentions vis a vis customers. The information is needed to develop a complete view of the value of the meeting. To continue the example above, consider two evaluation approaches, one based only on the sponsors' stated reason for the meeting and one that included both the stated reason and attendees' expectations. The first approach would fail to detect a great deal value that people may have derived from the meeting.

- The data are useful in interpreting evaluation results. Consider a situation where attendees reported dissatisfaction with the meeting. It is important to know if the dissatisfaction derived from their walking into the event with unrealistic expectations.

- Finally it is important to recognize the distinction between what people got out of a meeting and what they wanted to get. Its entirely possible that a conference was extremely valuable, but *not* for the reasons that motivated initial attendance. This information is important to conference organizers because it provides feedback about how the conference was advertised, and about any disjunction between the meeting as planned and the meeting as delivered. An overview of data collection from the attendees' point of view appears as Table 1.

**Table 1: Assessment from Attendees' Point of View**

| | What did they want? | What did they get? | Value of what they got |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Products and services** | | | |
| Specific | | | |
| General | | | |
| Presentations | | | |
| Specific | | | |
| General | | | |
| Interaction with others | | | |
| Specific | | | |
| General | | | |

<u>Indicators/measurement:</u> While it is premature to work out the details of how all necessary data will be measured, it is useful to have a sense that the necessary data can be obtained. The key is to lead respondents through a logical sequence of questions that will help them remember their experience at the meeting and their reactions to it. I envision either a questionnaire or an interview along the general lines shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Interview Logic**

| | | **Influence of the session** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Session | Did you attend? | Discuss it with others? | Influence thinking or a decision? | Dramatic or noteworthy impact?* |
| 1 | | | | |
| 2 | | | | |
| ... | | | | |
| n | | | | |

* Obtain details

## Exhibitors

Exhibitors show at conferences for five reasons:

- Business leads
- Solidify existing customer relationships
- Derive information on markets and customer needs
- Intelligence on the competition
- Raising their corporate profile

**Table 3: Exhibitor Questions**

| | How important was this reason? | Did conference help meet objective?* |
|---|---|---|
| **Customer relations** | | |
| New Business leads | | |
| Relations with existing customers | | |
| Corporate profile | | |
| **Market knowledge** | | |
| Business | | |
| Technology | | |
| **Knowledge of competition** | | |
| Products, services | | |
| Pricing | | |
| Markets | | |

* Details if high satisfaction or dissatisfaction

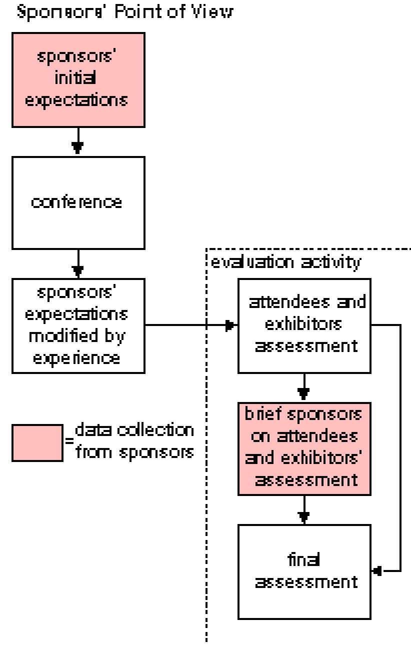
It's not practical to ask people to quantify these goals, but it is practical to ask people which goals were important how well they think the goals were met. The general logic of the questioning is shown in Table 3.

## Sponsors

Because producing a conference is difficult, time consuming and expensive, organizations do it only when they believe that useful purposes will be served. Evaluation from the sponsors' point of view should proceed based on a logic outlined in Figure 1. Data should be collected by means of either individual or group interviews with a few key people in each sponsoring organization. Questions to those people should include expectations and opinions about the following.

- Number and type of attendees
- Number and type of exhibitors
- Financials
- Content
- Impact on key individuals within the sponsor groups (e.g. agency heads, representatives of trade associations)
- Impact on the sponsoring organization

Figure 1: Conference Evaluation from the Sponsors' Point of View



### Contextual Information

The data collection outlined above is all focused directly on what impact a conference has on particular groups. In order to derive maximum value from the evaluation, certain contextual information is also needed, as illustrated in Table 4.

**Table 4: Contextual Information**

| Information | Need for information |
|---|---|
| Demographics on attendees | Conference will have different impact on different classes of attendees |
| Attendee's prior knowledge about topic of meeting | Initial expertise affects value derived from conference |
| Why did people not attend? | Useful for planning |
| Competing sources of information for information at conference | Competitive analysis |

### Methods of Data Collection

Without knowing a great many context-specific details, it is impossible to specify a methodology. Based on experience, however, a few guidelines can be articulated.

- Most data collection should take place approximately 3 -- 6 weeks after the conference. Some time is needed for attendees to settle back into a routine where they might apply their new knowledge, but too long a delay will dim their memories for detail.
- Depending on results from the first round of post-conference data collection, it may be wise to follow selected cases for a longer period of time.
- If at all possible, pre-conference data on expectations should be collected from at least a sample of people who registered.

The choice of a sampling method will depend on the total number of attendees, the variety of subgroups of people at the conference, and the need for interviews as opposed to questionnaires.