

My Dream Conference: Would Someone Please Hold the Conference of My Dreams?

☒ The last conference I went to might be the last conference I ever go to. I do like some parts of conferences, but not all, or even most. Medical manager conferences do not seem to have changed since I first started going to them in the late 80's. Big sessions with big names. Little sessions with little names. The Exhibit Hall. Parties. Get-togethers. Late nights and early mornings.

I usually expect to accomplish **two things** during the conference.

One is to pick up some little pearl of wisdom from a random conversation that goes like this:

THEM: Blah blah blah blah.

ME: Hey, what did you just say?

THEM: Blah blah blah blah.

ME: You do that? At your practice? And it works?

THEM: Blah.

ME: How do you do that?

THEM: Blah blah blah blah yadda yadda yadda.

ME: I've gotta try it – thanks so much! Hey can I get your card and call you if I get stuck?

THEM: Blah yadda yadda.

ME: Yeah, great to meet you too!

The **second** is the brain time I get during a totally boring session when I can think without interruption about a problem I'm trying to solve. I can reflect, scribble notes and no one cares. The phone is not ringing, there's not a line at my door, there's not a to-do list to do in my to-do book. One thing I can never get enough of is time to think. Work is

full, almost every minute, with noise and interruptions and lots of people needing something. What I need, what we all need, is more time to think. If you never have time to think, or plan, or process, there is no managing going on.

Here is what my dream conference would look like:

1. **Speakers on big screens** – What is the value of having a big name speaker come personally to a conference? Have them speak virtually. Save a lot of money for us and save a lot of time for them. Come to think of it, what do the big names actually contribute to the conference? I'm not sure.
2. **Infomercials** – Why not have the exhibitors do infomercials at breaks in the programs? Anyone can make a video explaining their product. The videos could be available on the conference YouTube Channel for anyone who misses the infomercials and wants to flip through them.
3. **No exhibit hall** – I've heard so many vendors say they won't have the budget soon to attend conferences. How do vendors raise the money to attend conferences, give out goodies and door prizes and sponsor parties? By raising their product price, of course. When I hear people say "We couldn't have a conference without the exhibit hall," I think "I bet we could have a better conference without the exhibit hall." No exhibit hall means a lot more time to meet with people I really want to see. No exhibit hall means I don't have to carry home a bunch of literature I don't want. No exhibit hall means I don't have to feel guilty about finding the fastest way from the front of the hall to the coffee stand/food/bar.
4. **Breakouts on demand** – I'd like to go to smaller breakout sessions when I want to fit them into my schedule. If I get into a great discussion with someone, I don't want to drop it to run to a session, I want to go with the

flow. Breakouts could be constantly running on screens in dedicated rooms, or I could get them on my laptop whenever I was ready for them.

5. **The Unconference** – there are several versions of the Unconference, but the version I've been exposed to is one where a huge block of time at a conference was completely unprogrammed. It was the second day of a two-day conference and all throughout the first day, attendees wrote things they wanted to talk about on Post-it notes and stuck them on a big blank wall. The conference organizers were responsible for combining like ideas, assigning a time and a room and finding a facilitator for the topic. I came to a conference with a need and my need was met! Conferences, especially large ones, by necessity must choose topics and book speakers far in advance. With as fluid as healthcare now is, conferences need to match the fluidity of healthcare to be pertinent.
6. **Networking, networking, networking** – What can't I get ANY other place? A conversation with my peers. People with different experiences, different perspectives and different ideas. That's the best thing I can bring home from a conference.

What does your dream conference look like?