

Why do we go to conferences?

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I just returned from the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) meeting in Orlando, with approximately 30,000 participants one of the largest oncology conferences. Like other conferences of this size, the experience can be overwhelming, but thankfully the organizers are getting better every year in using technology that helps in finding the most interesting sessions. Most sessions are made available as video podcasts or online presentations. There is currently still a delay of 24 hours, but I wouldn't be surprised to see the sessions streamed live as video over the internet in coming years. This year's ASCO also had the first official Twitter meet-up, although there still was relatively little Twitter activity compared to other conferences.

Last week we announced Science Online London, the follow-up conference of last year's Science Blogging 2008: London, to take place August 22 at the Royal Institution. I am helping to organize the conference, and I'm finding myself in the middle of discussions about session topics, speakers and the right format to present and discuss science blogging, wikis, and other science-related activities happening online.

These two events started me thinking about the reasons I go to conferences. After all, traveling to conferences is not only expensive, but can also be exhausting, and too much airline travel is certainly not good for the environment (places like Dopplr can calculate your carbon profile). Here are a few points that I think make a conference a good conference worth attending in person:

Conferences should present new and exciting information which can not be presented differently

Oral presentations at conferences are usually the first public presentation of interesting research findings before they appear as published paper a little (or much) later. What we don't want to see is the presentation of the same old data that we have already seen the year before. Good educational sessions and keynote lectures find informative or entertaining ways to present their information, and again should not be simply a repeat performance (unless the audience is completely different).

Most conferences encourage the presentation of unpublished work, but speakers

are often careful in doing so for a variety of reasons, e.g. fear of getting scooped, fear of problems with journal submissions or fear of problems with patentable work. This fear can make conference presentations rather boring, as presenters might hold back with the real exciting stuff until these results are at least accepted for publication.

Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory try to solve this problem by policies that essentially make their meetings non-public. During the last week we have seen an intensive discussion (e.g. On the challenges of conference blogging) whether or not the sessions in a CSHL meeting can be communicated publicly by participating scientists via blogs or Twitter. I think that there is nothing wrong with small conferences being non-public, and that the same rules should apply to science bloggers as they do apply to journalists. But the conference organizers should clearly state their policies regarding blogging (including Twitter, FriendFeed and other microblogging tools).

Conferences should enable as much active participation of as many participants as possible

If we just want to listen to a presentation, we could do that without going to a conference, thanks to video streaming, SlideShare and other ways of presenting online. Sometimes a paper is even published on the same the day as the plenary session, as happened recently with the JUPITER trial.

Smaller sessions that leave enough room for discussions, unconferences and poster sessions are all good formats to encourage active participation. It should be a goal at least for smaller conferences that every attendee has had a chance for active participation in one way or another. But active participation in a session is much more focussed than discussions in coffee breaks between sessions or afterwards in the bar.

Conferences should facilitate personal networking

Meeting someone in person is very different from interacting online via email, Twitter or social network. For many people this is the real reason to go to a conference. Or as Henry Gee puts it (slightly out of context), “the most important part is to hang around in bars.” Smaller conferences (e.g. 100-150 people), enough time for coffee and lunch breaks between sessions, and social activities around conferences (from science tours to skiing) all facilitate networking.

I’m looking forward to go to a very special conference in five weeks: Science Foo Camp. And let’s see whether we can put together an interesting Science Online London conference. Please suggest and discuss session topics and speakers in the Nature Network Forum, FriendFeed group or via email until June 19. We are still looking for interesting session ideas, speaker suggestions and other suggestions to make this an exciting conference.