Our first dividend was paid at the 2002 PASS Summit in Seattle.

In 18 months of working together in the company, corresponding through email almost daily and monthly phone calls, the three of us had never met. We'd founded a company, generated some revenue, contracted authors to write, and made a decision to buy out some of our partners, but we'd never met in person as a group. I’d had the chance for an hour chat and cup of coffee with Brian earlier in the year when he came to town on business and I’d shared lunch with Andy in January when he was in town for the first Summit in Denver.

This was exciting for me. This was first chance for us all to get together and talk about the company and have a real business meeting. After all the time I’d spent in corporate meetings getting nothing accomplished, all the time I’d been a part of a startup following other people’s agendas, this was the first chance that I’d be in a room with my company. I could set the agenda, or at least a part of it, and we could seriously discuss strategy and see where this little enterprise might go.

We all flew to Seattle a day early, setting up in Brian’s room at the Sheraton, right next to the Convention Center. Our plan was to take most of the day working on SQLServerCentral, and as usually happens in the business world, it didn’t quite work out that way.

We had the best of intentions. We had ideas, and we had ambition, and even one of Andy’s famous flip charts, but we also were still getting to know each other. A lot of time was spent going off on tangents, using our own experiences to relate to something, but often just storytelling, reliving our pasts with each other.

Don’t misunderstand me; this wasn’t a waste of time. This was bonding time, time getting to know each other and learning to work together in a close environment. Face time that we hadn’t had prior to this was invaluable in us becoming more of team, something that we desparately needed. As we’d learn over the years, we didn’t get enough of this, and I think the company could have grown even more if we’d made more time to meet in person over the years.

Our working time was short, and that day went fast. We ended up with new ideas, and a lot of notes. As with any strategy or brainstorming session, we would likely never implement many of the items we talked about, but some would become a reality over the years, and this set up a pattern where we would meet every year before the Summit as our annual board meeting.

## Party Time

When Andy and I walked into Brian’s suite, he had a surprise for us: our first swag. We’d been promoting the PASS Summit as a part of our growth plan, and we were earning referral fee for each person that registered with our code. We had some success with this, and we wanted to give something back to our community members that used the code.

Brian came up with the idea of having shirts embroidered with our logo. Since all of us were working in the corporate world, we had nice Oxfords made to give away at the opening night reception. Andy and I got ours in advance so we could wear them that night, and despite the need for a hot iron, I was thrilled to hold up a shirt with the name of my company on it. My company, one that I owned an equal share of with my partners, as opposed to the promises of stock options that would never amount to much or the limited stock purchase plans I’d enjoyed with my current company. Even though the shares weren’t worth much in 2002, they were mine. And I had a shirt that made it all seem much more real.

We headed to the Convention Center to setup early since we were going to be in the opening reception. Brian’s wife, Jennifer, and a friend of hers had made the trip with Brian to see Seattle and the five of us trooped across the street, lugging boxes of shirts.

In those days, the opening reception was in one of the large, open rooms at the Convention Center, and people walked in with their badges to a large cocktail party. Everyone got one or two drink tickets, and apart from a few round tables and cash bars around the perimeter, the room was open to facilitate conversation.

This was the first time we’d been a part of organizing ourselves, and it showed. We got two tables from the organizers and set them up near the back of the room. We had shirts behind us, and a laptop with a spreadsheet open on one table. Our plan was to look up names on the spreadsheet, confirm a badge, and hand them a shirt. Andy and Brian were handing out shirts while Brian’s wife and friend would grab the correct shirt size from the boxes. I was marking the laptop.

How hard could this be?

People at the door were mentioning the SQLServerCentral table as people walked in, and a few people walked up. We asked their name, I looked it up, confirmed their registration, someone gave them a shirt, with Andy or Brian shaking a hand and thanking them.

A few glitches became apparent within about 10 minutes. First, we had a few mistakes, people who’d sworn that they’d registered with the code and so I was frantically going up and down the list checking to be sure something wasn’t misspelled. We eventually realized that we should sort this out later, so we decided to write down their name and email, apologize, and promise to sort things out on Tuesday.

Second, we were slow, and a bit of a line formed. What happens when you walk into a new room and see a line? Apparently you get in it, even if you have no idea why it exists. We found people getting to the table, asking what we were giving away, and being a little annoyed that we only had shirts for people that we had referred to the Summit.

I looked up after about 15 minutes and saw a line stretching three quarters of the way across the room. When you are in a room that’s over 200 feet deep, that’s a lot of people. It was amazing, and it reminded me of some very busy nights when I was bartending in a nightclub. It’s busy, and there’s nothing you can do except buckle down, so that’s what I did. I started joking and laughing with people. Welcoming them with some humorous comment, asking them if they’d brought me a drink, or making a joke. With a few people that hadn’t used our code, I joked that I’d trade a shirt for a couple glasses of wine.

Until someone brought me two glasses of Chardonnay.

I realized that wasn’t the best strategy, but gave someone a shirt and continued on. It was a mild disaster, but one that was hilarious after 30 minutes. We’d created this huge buzz, and almost taken over the opening reception with our little giveaway. It was a riot, to me, and four or five glasses of Chardonnay might have contributed to that.

Andy was less thrilled. To him it was a little unprofessional and a bit of a FUBAR situation. At some point I started doing some voices, imitating Marge Simpson for some reason. I got some laughs and smiles, and enjoyed myself thoroughly. I don’t even know if there were any opening events since I was so busy trying to get people checked off on my list that my focus seemed to only extend to the people right in front of the table.

I did meet a few people that had read my articles, and shook some hands. It seemed that the event lasted all night, but it was just a couple hours. We packed up the remaining shirts and stored them in the Convention Center before heading out to a late dinner. Just across the street was the Cheesecake Factory, a franchise that we would come to frequent many times in the years to come.

This time there were the five of us, all tired and hungry, getting a booth to crowd in and finally try to relax. I was still doing Marge Simpson as our waitress came up and got more smiles, and more than a few jokes from Brian. I think Andy was ready to slug me, but he put up with my antics, and we had a great time reliving the evening. Already we were thinking how we could turn this to more of an advantage the next year and build a bigger party.

## The Checks

The rest of the Summit was pretty much the standard conference for us. I think all three of us had sessions to deliver, and we supported each other by attending those sessions. We would watch some sessions, and sit around talking in the hallways as well. In another pattern that would become familiar over the years, Brian attended many more sessions than Andy and I. He was more motivated to learn the technology, while Andy and I tended to look to meet people. In those days the Convention Center couches were located on the 6th floor, and we spent a lot of time sitting there and starting conversations with other weary conference attendees that were taking a break.

The first morning, before the keynote, we got a surprise. Brian walked up and gave each of us a check. He said this was the first dividend after we’d gotten the money stable and had a few months worth of operating expenses in the bank.

When I worked for Swynk, I received a nice monthly check. I wrote often enough, and on enough popular topics to earn a little over $200 a month as a writer. It was a nice little bit of income that helped pay for expenses around the house. That income went away when Swynk, then Database Journal, stopped paying us. My starting a new company and continuing to work without income hadn’t gone over well with my wife.

In 18 months, I’d foregone a lot of income, only publishing one article in SQL Server Magazine that paid me. The rest of my work was in building SQLServerCentral, and it was essentially building equity to this point. Sure we’d met expenses, we’d purchased servers and we’d bought out some partners. However other than covering my expenses to fly to Seattle for the Summit, I hadn’t seen any income. When Brian handed me that check for a little over $1000, none of it seemed to matter.

I headed home on Friday, a check in my pocket, and a SQLServerCentral shirt in my bag, sure that this company was really going to be something special in my life.b