Tips for First-Time ALA National Conference Attendees

By Ruth V. Fry, Office Manager for Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr LLP's Baltimore office
Eric L. Hightower, CLM, SPHR, Director of Administration for Davis Agnor Rapaport Skalny, LLC

OK, so you have registered, made your flight arrangements and booked the hotel through ALA's portal — now what?

Before Leaving for the Conference

Conference App: Be sure to download the conference app before you head off to conference. It has lots of information including schedules, updated locations, alerts if sessions are canceled or moved, and much more.

Handouts: All handouts are available digitally in advance of the conference. If you are using a laptop or iPad, you can download copies of all the sessions you plan to attend prior to leaving for the conference. If you can remote connect to your office, you could also simply download the handouts to your office server and then remotely connect during a session. Free Wi-Fi is provided in the conference area. As an alternative, you can always print the handouts before leaving and carry them with you.

Session Manager: This is a great way to volunteer and help the Association. The work is easy and you meet great people. You will find that you will make longtime friends with other session managers with whom you work. Contact *profdev@alanet.org* for more information.

Business Partner Events and Invitations: By now you may have received invitations to business partner (vendor) after-hours events. Only sign up for the ones you can actually attend. These are terrific ways to get to know other ALA members and business partners on a more personal level. Bonus — all the food and drinks are free, and you will enjoy the time spent. Many chapter members attend a variety of these events and are happy to have you join them. Don't forget to take your business cards!

Business Partners: What goods, services or support needs does your firm/organization have? Ask the stakeholders at your firm for 30 minutes to talk business partner needs, and tackle questions like:

- "What do you need now?"
- "What solutions will you need later?"
- "Who should I speak to at the conference to help you along the way?"

Create a short list: Make the Exhibit Hall an opportunity to gain new resources from business partners looking to help firms like yours. A quick example: What business partners are you working with now that are critical to your firm? Use the Exhibit Hall directory to locate business partners by solution category.

Business Partner Mailers: What should you do with all those cards from business partners asking you to stop by their booth to win and learn? Keep them if you have an interest in their product or service. Consider putting them in booth-number order. Start with Aisle 100 first and place the higher-numbered aisles behind that. That way, you have these cards in hand and can simply drop them, instead of your business card, in the bowl.

At Conference

Registration Desk: This is where you pick up the bag that includes your name badge and information to get you through conference. Be sure to say hello to the ALA staff when you register. They work hard for us and enjoy hearing your appreciation! Make sure to visit the ribbon table and pick up the one that reads “First-Time Attendee.” Don’t hesitate to stop by the local hosting chapter’s booth for valuable information about area restaurants and attractions.

Name Badge: ALA did away with tickets a couple of years ago, so you must wear your badge to be identified as a part of the conference. You are required to wear it before entering any session, meal or the Exhibit Hall.

Plan Your Day: Plan your day the night before, or do it over a nice cup of coffee in the morning. Take a look at the conference materials and know which sessions you will attend. Put your agenda in the conference app and you'll be set for the day.

Sessions: Even though you may have selected certain sessions if you completed the session preference survey, you are not obligated to attend those sessions. If there is a pressing need in your firm or you need personal/professional training in a specific subject area, maximize your opportunity and attend those sessions that will deliver what you need. You get the most benefit from the conference by attending sessions all three days. After all, this is why the conference is labeled educational!

It is really your own business whether you take advantage of the sessions, but try not to get caught up in “off-road” trips with other members who might want to shop or take sightseeing trips. If your firm is helping defray the cost of the conference, it would be better to commit the time to give back value for their dollars. With good planning, you can attend the sessions to learn the information needed to move your firm forward and still have time to see the sights on the afternoon before or the morning after conference.

Chapter Dinner: If you are a member of a chapter, your chapter president or another leader will notify you of the chapter dinner’s time and location. This is a great way to get together with your fellow members to relax and have a nice dinner while in another state. The chapter picks up the tab, and you get to network and learn more about one aother.

Dress Code: You should consult the forecast for the city where the conference is being held to determine the expected temperatures. Session rooms tend to be quite chilly. You are encouraged to bring a jacket or light sweater. The dress code is business casual; generally speaking, members do not wear shorts or flip-flops. Most are dressed in professional or business casual attire, as they are representing a professional organization, firm and local chapter.

Exhibit Hall (Business Partners): This is where the business partners set up booths to discuss their product or service. Take plenty of business cards! Just about every business partner will have some sort of giveaway. Some give items away every day. Several of the business partners may follow up with you after the conference. You will most likely see a few of the chapter business partners in the hall. Please be sure to stop by and say how much you appreciate the business partner sponsoring your chapter and express how important and valuable this is to the success of your chapter.

Take or grab a bag to collect “vendor goodies.” You can always ship them back to your office via FedEx or UPS, which will be on-site in the business center. You will be shocked how members of your firms *love* these goodies!

Some meals are hosted in the Exhibit Hall, where you may also find presentations of educational topics, charging stations for electronics, lounge areas, and free coffee, tea and beverages including water.

Certified Legal Managers (CLM)®: If you are a CLM, there is separate lounge area that allows for quiet time and is usually stocked with additional goodies not provided to general conference attendees. This is also a good place to network with fellow CLMs from around the country.

International Lounge: If you are from a country outside the United States, there is a lounge for you as well. Enjoy a cup of coffee, check your email and meet with fellow international colleagues to discuss a variety of topics.

Newcomers: Do attend the Leadership Newcomers Connection. This is just for first-time conference attendees, and you will meet many members from all over the world as well as ALA officers and directors. Many first-time attendees make friends with other first-time attendees and keep in touch for years.

Socializing: Spend *some* time with your fellow chapter members, but you should branch out and get to know other members. This is an experience and you will learn quickly from other ALA members. Break out of your comfort zone and expand your own network.

Meals: Breakfast and lunch are included with registration all three days. Times and locations are in the conference app. You can sit with friends from home if you like, but you might consider sitting at a table with members you don’t know. You will gain lots of ideas and make new friends whom you can contact in the future. Be sure to attend the Association Lunch on Tuesday for an update on the Association and the passing of the gavel starting the new International President’s term. The Awards Dinner is not to be missed. This is where the IDEA Awards and many other awards are presented to deserving members, and a delicious dinner is served.

Stay Hydrated: Drink plenty of water. You would be surprised how dehydrated you can get in the conference rooms.

Idea Exchanges: There will be several Idea Exchanges between Friday and Sunday. If you are able, pick a topic you like and attend. You will meet other members with similar interests and can forge new relationships. These exchanges occur throughout the conference, so please check the schedule for the one(s) that apply to you.

Business Partner Educational Sessions: Too few people take advantage of the *Business Matters!* sessions. They are typically 30 minutes long and are usually held around a break period. Attendees can actually glean a lot of information about specific topics. The conference planners ask the business partners to make these sessions educational and not fill the time with sales pitches, and 99 percent of the business partners follow these instructions.

***BOLD Bites* Sessions:** These are 20-minute sessions presented by various conference speakers. Some can be a follow-up to a heavy topic while others are on a completely different theme — something new from the speaker. These sessions allow you to ask specific questions of the presenters. Also, many speakers will stay after a session for a few minutes to answer additional questions. Don’t be afraid to ask. As a matter of fact, do not be afraid to raise your hand and ask questions during the session. Not only will speakers answer, but others who have experienced your situation will answer as well. You are there for answers and education. Don’t miss opportunities by not asking.

After Conference

Back home: Once you return to the office, be sure to complete the post-conference evaluation that is emailed to you within a few days of the close of conference. This feedback is key for the conference planners to know what went well and what, if anything, did not. Be sure to schedule some time with your firm's stakeholders to share your key takeaways from the valuable educational sessions, as well as exhibitor contacts you made. A good rule of thumb is to come back with three ideas you can explore and implement into your firm. Try to reach out to some of the new colleagues you met and touch base on any issues you discussed or deliver any follow-ups you promised. It is also a good idea to scan any session handouts with notes that you may want to keep and store them on your computer in categories for future reference!