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It's Conference Season – *Are You Playing?*

In the financial services industry, it seems like most of the educational events and conferences fall into a narrow timeframe in the spring and fall. Between the months of March and May and also between September and Thanksgiving, most all of the primary and secondary education events and conferences are held. A lot of annual events were upended by COVID and the 2+ year hiatus has caused many financial institution executives to re-evaluate their participation in these events. My last two blogs talked about the importance of employee education, so this topic of conferences and who should attend seems timely and relevant to discuss now. My thoughts are organized around 1) Why it is important to attend conferences, 2) Who should be attending and 3) How to decide which conferences provide the maximum benefit.

Let's begin with how we are defining a conference. A general definition of a conference might be "a gathering of people who have a common reason for meeting at a centralized location". However, some banking executives might think of a conference as "a boondoggle or fun event that has a stated educational purpose but is really just an opportunity to socialize". Now to be clear, getting together with other bankers has its merits, but if you are a mid-manager trying to get approved to attend an educational conference, any resistance you may encounter may be based on the senior leader's experience with the boondoggle-type conference. "Oh, your conference is held in Vegas? BOONDOGGLE!!!" (Note: there are a lot of conferences held in Vegas and regardless of what you personally think of Las Vegas, they get held there due to a) There are cheap flights and hotels and b) it's one of the few places in the U.S. that can handle a multi-thousand attendee conference ... so stop hating on Vegas ... :). There are a lot of conferences on the calendar and they are definitely not all the same. Many are very education focused and keep the "fun stuff" to a minimum. Others are nearly exclusively for enabling networking. They can be multi-day or a single day. They can be virtual but most organizations are coming back to live meetings.

I just recently attended the ICBA Live! Conference in San Antonio. Everybody was excited about being back in person and the conference was well attended and well run. It had the appropriate mix of access to vendors (although I thought this year the expo hall hours were unusually shortened ...), educational sessions and networking/social events. Most banker attendees were either senior management or board members and I think for that conference, having senior leaders attend makes sense. A state association may have a similar annual event that draws the senior executives but also might have conferences focused on marketing, technology/security or compliance. Even demographics oriented conferences are regularly held at the state level such as Young Bankers or Women in Banking. These tend to be more educational in focus and can be an integral part of a bank employees overall education "maintenance". The main difference in an in-person versus virtual conference is the chance meetups, the "I ran into someone and we started a conversation about X" type of things that just seem to organically occur when you are in person. Very, very difficult to achieve that same vibe on a virtual meeting.

I also like that directors are invited to attend conferences like the ICBA Live! Conference. There are also state conferences that are focused on directors as attendees. Here's my suggestion: If you are sending directors as a "reward" for being a director, then great, let them go and do whatever they want. However, if you want your director to get a specific educational benefit out of conference attendance, then do the following:

- Get a copy of the agenda and mark specific sessions you want your director to attend. If more than one director is attending, split them up to cover more sessions.
- Get a copy of the vendors that are exhibiting. Mark it up denoting the vendors that your FI already uses, those that you are considering using and any that represent a new or emerging technology. Again, if you are sending

more than one director, focus one director on a specific area like emerging payments and highlight 5 vendors you want them to visit. Have another director focus on a different area, such as the upcoming changes related to how fees like overdrafts will be impinged, so they are targeting vendors that offer fee enhancement services.

- Circling back to the educational sessions I referenced above, if you are focusing a director on a particular topic, make sure they are assigned any educational breakouts that align with that topic. There is no reason you can't maximize the investment you are making by having one or more directors attend a conference.

Each FI must look at the employees that are likely to be future leaders and then budget for them to begin attending conferences. Regional at first and then, national conferences. Why? Because as a future leader, they need access to the trends and strategies for decisions that they will ultimately face. And, they need to start establishing relationships with other bankers similarly situated. Who knows what future problems tomorrow's leaders will remediate simply because they had formed a relationship with another banker who they could rely on for wisdom? Both of our CEOs Joey Quinlan and Pax Mogenson were at the ICBA conference and every time I ran across them, they were in a circle of associates, bankers, and friends, both old and new. The value of establishing these relationships cannot be calculated. For me, ICBA gave me the opportunity to attend education sessions on Faster Payments and Digital Banking, explore the new technologies that ICBA is fostering through its association with the Venture Center and visit with vendors in the expo. Access to the vendors is much more than tchotchkes and prize drawings, you can connect with existing vendors, explore new ones and find out what is trending across a variety of Fintechs. Very valuable.

Regional conferences can be the best source of getting future leaders involved in educational conferences. I am fortunate to be a featured speaker at these types of events. In the coming weeks, I will be delivering keynotes at Southern Financial Exchange's (SFE) Annual Conference (http://sfeannual.org/aws/SFE/pt/sp/conference_home), the Louisiana Bankers Association Annual Conference (<https://lba.org/LBAConvention>) and the North Carolina Bankers Association Annual Conference (<https://web.cvent.com/event/4fbd2d34-618b-4b4e-8404-9028c99264b5/summary>). All of these are quality events that have a packed schedule of timely breakout sessions and stimulating main stage speakers. My contribution will be focused on assisting attendees in understanding the importance of innovation and strategic decision making in financial services. I highly encourage you to find out when your state banking or regional payment association conference is being held and make sure that at least one person from your organization is represented. And if you have multiple employees that need to have the conference experience, you can split up who goes where. Maybe you have some operational folks attending the payments conference while other future leaders are at the banking association conference.

This summer, I will continue my association with the Graduate Banking School at the University of Colorado. I teach a mandatory 2nd year class on banking technology and periodically also teach an innovation in banking elective. I am honored each year that they invite me back and feel that this is a great opportunity for me to interact with hundreds of future bank leaders. LSU has an excellent graduate banking school and some state associations also have summer graduate banking programs, such as Louisiana, Alabama and Georgia. Targeting future leaders to complete a 2 or 3 year summer program through one of these graduate banking schools is a must to create a well-rounded future leader. The vast majority of my GSBC students each year work in lending or compliance. The grounding I can provide them in banking technology will be invaluable when they ultimately become a part of the executive team and must assist in making decisions about what technology the bank will acquire and deploy. And they develop relationships with both fellow students and instructors. In the 8 years I have been on the faculty of GSBC, I have fielded numerous calls from former students who are wrestling with an issue in their institutions who now have me as a resource. How much is that worth??

And I certainly cannot ignore the excellent efforts of FNBB in providing quality educational and networking events. Each June, FNBB hosts our customers at what we call Summer Conference. Held at Sandestin Resort in the panhandle of Florida, this is an opportunity for us all to mix, mingle and learn. Summer Conference is unique in that it is a family-focused event. When I attended last year's Summer Conference, I ran into bankers who started attending Summer Conference as youth 25 years ago. And there is always a strong program of education for each of the three morning business sessions. If you are an FNBB customer and come this June, you'll get to hear me talk about how FIs can "Achieve an Innovation Mindset" where I will describe the innovation initiatives that are underway across the whole FNBB organization. Then in October, FNBB is sponsoring The BSA Experience, a multi-day conference that focuses on the unique BSA compliance challenges and how to remediate BSA risk. Terri Sands from Secura (now part of Stout) will be a featured speaker and I am creating a unique and innovative interactive exercise specifically for this conference.

Each and every bank employee should have some type of education as part of their annual review. They should be working towards a certification, increasing knowledge on a key subject or staying abreast of industry changes. And you don't have to figure out what conferences makes sense. You assign that responsibility to the employee; let them research and present their manager with an education plan that stays within an assigned budget appropriate to their job function. Then you can evaluate any conferences that they suggest and determine if they achieve the stated education goals and are appropriate, again based on the employees position within the institution. Don't let any biases you might have about the social / networking nature of some conferences keep you from allowing employees to attend a conference that will advance their knowledge, leadership qualities or provide new resources for problem solving.

I hope I get to see you or one of your team members at one of the upcoming conferences where I am speaking. If you are sending someone to one of those conferences, ask them to make a specific effort to speak with me; I'd love to make a personal contact. Or, perhaps I'll see you at an upcoming conference where I am just attending, as a part of my own educational goals. Like the Electronic Transactions Association (ETA) TRANSACT conference this April. ETA focuses primarily on the card industry and this is an area of critical focus for FNBB as we work on innovations involving faster payments and pay anyone, push credits. Where is the TRANSACT conference? Why it's in Las Vegas but I promise it's not a boondoggle!