

Summer 2009

The price, cost, and value of the SLA Annual Conference: Reflections from a first-time attendee

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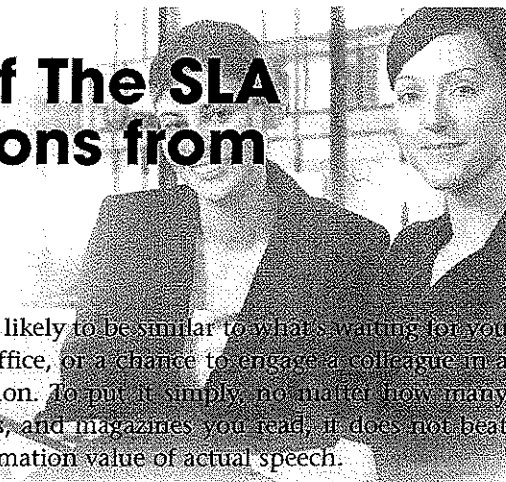


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The Price, Cost, and Value of The SLA Annual Conference: Reflections from a First-Time Attendee

by Mikhail Koulikov, 2009 New Member Professional Grant Recipient



As librarians, we are trained to think not only about information in the abstract, theoretical sense, but to consider the value, price, and cost of information. To see information as a commodity, and to interact with information as if it were a product. The details of the process may differ, but by definition, librarians provide access to information for consumers. And this is precisely why it is a novel experience for a librarian to find herself—or himself—in the role of the information consumer. Being familiar with the concept of information needs and information-seeking behaviors from library school lectures and journal articles is one thing; actually being put into a position of searching for information is another entirely.

At the heart of it, any professional conference is a space designed for the exchange of information. But a professional conference is not only an abstract 'space'; it is also an event with a very specific cost—registration charges, the price of an airline ticket and hotel accommodations, even the time spent away from one's home library. The question that anyone who attends a professional conference—and definitely a librarian—has to ask is simple: "Can my information need be fulfilled by these four days, and if so, will these four days be really worth whatever resources I spend on them?" Or, putting the same question in another way: "How do I make sure that my money, time, and effort are spent well and effectively?"

To begin answering this question, one good approach is simply to think about what a specific professional conference like SLAs actually offers to its attendees. One answer is obvious—four days worth of panel discussions and presentations, as described at length in the conference's program guide. But here, a more strategic kind of thinking is in order. Generally, SLA's program can be broken down into three major groups. And when thought about in the right way, within each of those groups, there are more than enough reasons to justify the time and money.

Of course, the first of these groups is the actual conference program, the sessions and roundtables that take up most of each day. What is absolutely crucial to keep in mind is that the kinds of information disseminated at these are most likely never going to be presented anywhere else. Whether it's an introduction to a new program, a look at how a particular organization—quite possibly, very much like yours—is handling the challenges it is facing, which

themselves are likely to be similar to what's waiting for you back at your office, or a chance to engage a colleague in a critical discussion. To put it simply, no matter how many books, journals, and magazines you read, it does not beat the sheer information value of actual speech.

The second group is the Info-Expo, or exhibit hall. All of five minutes in the exhibit hall should be enough to remind you that as a librarian, you too have an information need. You may know exactly what you are trying to find, or you may never have thought about formulating a thorough question. But what the Info-Expo makes clear is that if you have an information need, chances are very good to excellent that a company or organization has identified this need, and is working to fulfill it. From highly specialized science, technology and medicine publishers to a document delivery company whose focus is patents, regardless of what country they were filed in. From a young company that is seeking to redefine how case law is searched for, accessed and represented, to the British Library, a stroll through the Info-Expo is a powerful reminder that on the macro level, you are not alone. Whatever your needs, no matter how esoteric, you are probably not the first person to have those needs.

Finally, beyond the "formal" or official conference program, there are the events hosted by the SLA's individual chapters and divisions. Some, like the division business meetings and breakfasts, are themselves fairly formal; others like the Information Technology Division's *Embassy Ball* is significantly less so. They differ in both overall themes and basic specifics, but with regards to the one part that truly matters, all of them are far more alike than they are different. The theme that persists through every single one is that information professionals who are members of the Special Library Association constitute a unique and robust community. Beyond the macro level, on the level that is purely personal, as a "special librarian" you are never alone. Beyond your immediate co-workers, you are part of a group of people who share a set of beliefs and ideas, and who are always willing to share their knowledge within the group.

For a first-time SLA attendee like myself, the question of whether these four days would be truly worth it, both abstractly, and in concrete terms, was particularly relevant.

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Using Free Resources for Responsible Legal Research

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<http://lp.findlaw.com/>, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/cc.html>, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/states/listing.html>, and <http://www.romingerlegal.com/>.

If it's international law you're after, The Cornell Legal Information Institute guides you to a website (<http://www2.letown.edu/vl/>) with "over 2000 annotated links to high-quality English-language sources of information and analysis in a wide range of international affairs, international studies, and international relations topics. These sites are carefully selected for their long-term value, favoring those with cost-free, authoritative information and analysis online."³ The worldwide legal directories of HeirosGamos (www.hg.org) provide links to a variety of resources for over 160 countries, the United Nations, the European Union, and a wide range of governmental and non-governmental agencies.

The World Wide Web of information is not static. Resources are being added, deleted, edited and updated on a regular basis. We librarians can, as Ranganathan's Fourth law enjoins us, save the time of our users by keeping ourselves abreast of the evolving legal research scene. ■

³ The WWW Virtual Library: International Affairs Resources accessed July 3, 2009 <<http://www2.letown.edu/vl/>>

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I arrived in Washington fully intending to make sure that they would be. And four days later, I was absolutely comfortable saying yes, they were. The next week, I was already working with two of the document delivery services I had come across in the Info-Expo, arranging a law school library tour with someone I chatted with at one of the Legal Division's Open Houses, and thinking about how my own library can continue to demonstrate and prove its value to our patrons and clients, based on the ideas suggested by the speakers at one of the panels.

I am based in New York City, so a trip to Washington was relatively easy to put together. When SLA is in New Orleans next year it may be a bit more complicated. Based on past experiences, the decision will be made easier by knowing how much I will be getting in return for my time, money and effort. ■

Conference Review: Creating Groupies: How to Add Value, Make Yourself Irreplaceable and Beat the Pants Off Google

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This discussion of the title analyst prompted me to wonder what exactly the role of the librarian is. We find information, we package it for the professionals in our enterprises, but must we also have the background to analyze it? In some fields such as biotechnology, medicine or law, the ability to analyze results requires field specific study and knowledge. The roles librarian must play continue to evolve.

So, the message was clear, and perhaps frightening. Librarians must deliver high-quality products and services. But, perhaps more important, librarians must be able to package or market those products and services in a way that will show they are essential to the business of the organization. If librarians fail to convince the decision makers in the C-suites of their organizations, they risk failure. In hard economic times, executives in the C-suite can't afford to bankroll any operations which don't contribute value and dollars to the

bottom line. Ms. Bates made it clear that our work is cut out for us. Time to put her advice into play.

Mary Ellen Bates provides business research to business professionals, and consulting and training services to the information industry. She is widely known as one of the nation's leading business researchers, with more than 25 years of experience in this discipline. Ms. Bates is a prolific writer and speaker and has provided expert comment on research topics to many media outlets including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Business Week and Forbes. Bates also routinely conducts workshops and training programs on various aspects of online and Internet research. Handouts for this program and others she presented at SLA 2009 are available at <http://www.BatesInfo.com/SLA2009>. Ms. Bates blogs at www.LibrarianofFortune.com. ■