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The 2009 OLA Conference by the Numbers

by **Robert Hulshof-Schmidt**

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The 2009 Conference was a great success. We had 485 people attend at least one full day; that's good attendance, especially given the current status of many travel and training budgets. The conference is OLA's primary means of generating operating revenue each year. The Board and Conference Committee set a budget goal of \$35,000 for this year. Despite the tight economy, we managed to bring in about \$34,500. Thanks for the success of the conference goes to everyone who participated in the conference and to an amazing conference committee. Their commitment and dedication made presenting this conference an absolute pleasure.

The data in this article are taken from online evaluations completed by conference attendees. 193 people completed surveys in the two weeks following the conference. That's a remarkable 40 percent response rate! Thanks to everyone who took the time to give your feedback. Future conference committees will use this information to shape the programs and schedules.

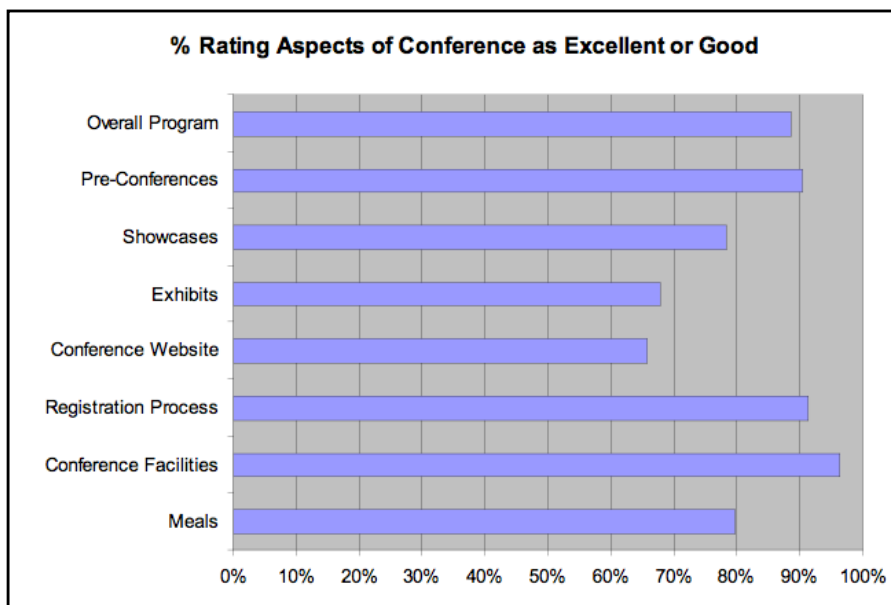
What did people say?

The first section of the survey asked people to rate eight aspects of the conference from 5 (excellent) to 1 (poor). This chart indicates the percentage of respondents that rated each aspect either a 4 or a 5. (Including ratings of 3 (average), all eight aspects drew over 95 percent.)

High marks go to our partner in this conference, the Salem Conference Center. Comments included the convenience of the location, the layout of the facility, and the friendliness of the staff. Salem Conference Center staff persons are some of the finest facility partners I have worked with. While it is impossible to get temperature, menu, and room noise set to everyone's satisfaction, the overall response was very positive. There were a number of helpful suggestions about the need for more break food and earlier coffee, if possible.

The more challenging aspects of the conference were the Web site and the exhibits, which still received good ratings. For a variety of reasons, the final conference program was not available until very close to the conference. This was understandably frustrating and is something future conference committees can learn from. Most of the concerns about the exhibits focused on the number of exhibitors and the availability of staff at exhibitor booths. Both of these were driven down by tight budgets. I was really impressed by the commitment of exhibitors to attend our conference despite current constraints.

Overall, attendees were very pleased with the program. A number of individual sessions received many specific positive comments. Most people were pleased with the balance of programs for library staff from different disciplines and library types. Three themes arose in response to the program:



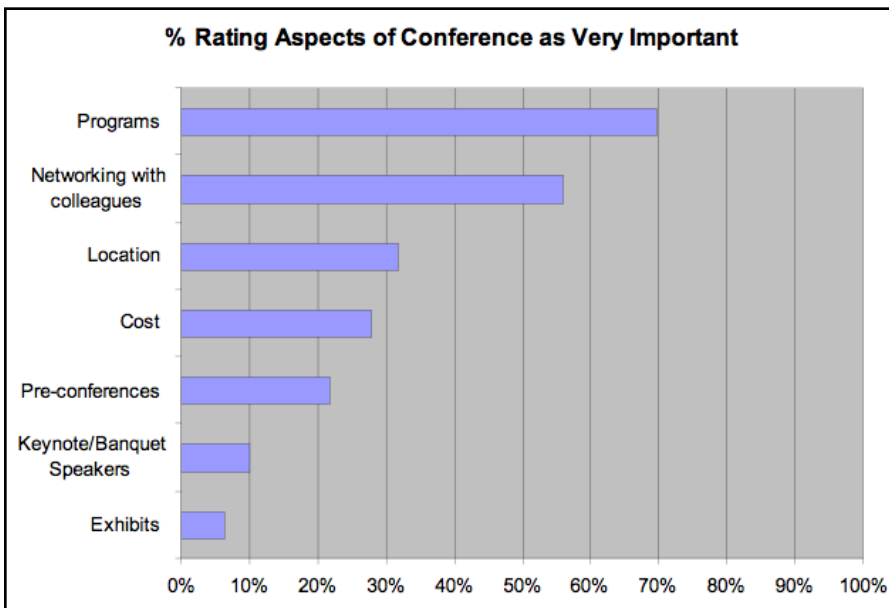
1. Many respondents suggested arranging topics in clusters or tracks. This was particularly of interest for people who could only attend one day of the conference. This is one of the great challenges of conference planning. Often when topics are clustered, attendees are frustrated that programs of interest compete in the same time slot. This is a difficult balance to strike, but something future conferences can strive to more fully achieve.
2. A significant number of respondents felt that the variable times for programs was unnecessary. Over 20 percent commented about programs being too long and breaks being too short. Program length is initially determined by the proposing group, but the conference committee can structure the program to encourage more consistency. There are some good suggestions in the report to the Board that will be used by the next conference committee.
3. The most consistent frustration was “not enough was presented in my specific area of interest.” A solution for this suggests itself: work with your OLA divisions, committees, and round tables to propose programs that interest you. The program committee does a great job of balancing the many proposals that come in, but we rely on OLA members to suggest topics and speakers. Given the highly participatory nature of OLA, more suggestions and presentations should be easy to achieve.

Why do people come?

The second section of the survey focused on why people attend the conference. Attendees were asked to rate seven factors from 3 (very important) to 1 (not important). The next chart shows how many people rated each aspect as very important.


Not surprisingly, the biggest draw is a strong set of programs. This matches the number of good suggestions we received for future programs and the strong (very positive) feedback that this year’s program received. While pre-conferences were rated much lower, those that are able to attend them provided equally strong feedback and appreciation in their comments.

Two related factors get mid-level responses: location and cost. While there were a few comments about the frequency of meeting in Salem, overall people like the facility and the relative convenience. Our conference is large enough that finding a good facility to accommodate us can be challenging. It’s clear that where the conference is held does matter, so siting is something for future conference committees to watch carefully. Although cost came in fourth, the number who rated it as very important was surprisingly low, especially this year. The OLA Board has worked hard



to keep registration costs low, and that seems to be reflected in this figure.

The other big draw should not come as a surprise. The opportunity to spend time with colleagues is a significant reason for attending the conference. In fact, most of the comments regarding location and cost were related to people's desire to see old friends, meet new colleagues, and discuss the business of their libraries with their peers.

At its heart, this is what OLA is about. As an all-volunteer organization, the variety of activities and programs that OLA offers is amazing. I've been involved with over a dozen state and regional library organizations, and I've never seen anything like the enthusiasm and collegiality of OLA. It's a pleasure to bring together a conference for such an engaged, interested, and participatory group. I encourage everyone to grab a hold of this spirit and find ways to be involved. Who knows, the next conference planning decision could be yours! 

Upcoming OLA Conference Information

2010

**OLA Awards Banquet
at Kells Irish Restaurant and Pub
in Portland, March 24, 2010**

No separate OLA Conference—The OLA Board encourages attendance at the **Public Library Association 2010 National Conference in Portland at the Oregon Convention Center March 23–27, 2010.**

More at http://www.placonference.org/general_information.cfm

Early Bird Rates
(deadline December 18)
PLA and Oregon Library
Association Members
\$195

Two OLA-sponsored preconferences at the Oregon Convention Center as part of the PLA National Conference:
a full day on graphic novels and libraries on March 23;
a ½ day on gaming in libraries on March 24.
Preconference registration rates to be announced.

2011

**OLA Conference at the
Salem Conference Center,
April 6–8, 2011**

2012

**OLA Conference at the River House in
Bend, April 25–27, 2012**