

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR ATTENDING A CONFERENCE

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The Ten Commandments

Having both organised and attended a number of international conferences, big and small, good and bad, we thought we would like to share some of our experiences with the interested reader. The observations of a number of conference reviewers are available in the perceptive conference reviews, which are given in the reference list. Mercifully, some of the more bizarre conferences attended by the reviewers have not been reviewed. This second set of *Ten Commandments* might usefully be read in conjunction with the Ten Commandments for Organising a Conference (see McAleer, 1997).

Commandment 1: Do not choose a conference on location alone

The three golden rules for pricing real estate are: 'Location, location, location'. Choosing to attend a conference solely on the basis of the real estate maxim can be a bad idea. Whereas conference organisers might not have much flexibility as to where to organise a conference, frequently being restricted to their own university environs, conference delegates generally have far greater degrees of freedom in choosing where to attend a conference. Ignoring this Commandment and choosing a conference solely on the basis of its (possibly great) location can have disastrous consequences, as is evident from conversations with many dissatisfied conference delegates. A rudimentary knowledge of international libel laws prevents us from being more specific, but the feelings of a large number of conference delegates have been captured accurately in Oxley's (2001a) review of a conference held in the mecca of tourism, Hawaii.

Commandment 2: Select an appropriate conference

Balance the relevance and quality of a conference against the probability of having a paper submission accepted. Some conferences will accept virtually any paper that is submitted (sadly, we are not making this up!) Of course, the rejection rates alone (historical or conjectured) of papers submitted for possible presentation at a conference are not necessarily an accurate guide as to the quality of a conference. Some conferences can, and do, self select in terms of quality, just as do many leading academic journals. However, it is clear that conferences can and do differ in quality, and some conferences do not seem to discriminate particularly well between good and bad, or relevant and irrelevant, papers.

A useful corollary to this Commandment is to attend a multi-disciplinary conference at least once during your academic career. Keynote speakers and other experts at such conferences typically make a serious effort to present the results of their research to the uninitiated (that is, to most of us in the audience), and can be refreshingly modest (if only because these experts realise that most in the audience do not know that they are actually famous).

Commandment 3: Beware of staying at student dormitories

There are those who might argue that a Commandment should be more threatening, such as: 'Do Not Stay at Student Dormitories'. [This may also hold true for students, apart from exceptional circumstances.] In view of international libel laws, and our actually having stayed at one or two perfectly decent student dormitories in the distant past, we have decided to be non-threatening. For the easily shocked, we recommend that you do not read the following paragraph.

We have collected together a sample of comments previously published in the Conference Review section of this *Journal*.

Informed sources reported that the student accommodation was basically OK — except the beds! Based on a small scale survey I formulated a simple model of bed appreciation along the lines: $T = f(\text{Age}, D)$ where T = tolerance to (virtually) non-existent mattresses, Age = age of delegate and D is a dummy variable taking the value 1 if married/partnered, 0, otherwise. The functional relationship was highly negatively non-linear in age with a significant dummy variable effect ... The other rather ironic comment was the request that 'visitors to student residences should be quiet' presumably so as not to disturb the late night student parties! (Oxley, 1988).

Random sampling of antipodean student residences seems to suggest that shower dis-function is a requirement — in this instance it seemed to be impossible to take a cool shower. As a result, a subtle shade of lobster seemed to be color of the week (Oxley, 1990).

After a 10–20 hours flying time and a 30-minute taxi ride from the airport, perhaps finding your room key doesn't fit the lock is slightly annoying.

However, finding that the key fits, but there is a woman in your bed (alternatively, the key fits, but the room is locked from the inside; the key fits, but the room is not made-up; the key fits and the room is made up, but someone else is already using it; you are sleeping in your bed and someone else enters in the middle of the night) opens up all sorts of possible reactions. (Oxley, 1994).

As is usually the case with the RES conferences, delegates were housed in the regulation grotty student rooms and offered indifferent institutionalized food. (George, 1995).

I'm not sure of the name of my student hall of residence ... (but) it looked like the previous resident had an interest in motor cycle maintenance and had been changing the oil in my room. Furthermore, there seemed to be a design fault with the communal shower, as it seemed impossible to prevent major flooding when operated. I guess the mop and bucket by the door should have alerted me. (Oxley, 1997).

There was a mouse in my room, but no telephone. (McAleer, McKenzie and Oxley, 1998)

The incredibly high bunk beds at one of the student dormitories at the University of Washington might have been suitable for basketballers, but not for anyone else. (An unreviewed World Congress of the Econometric Society, Seattle, Washington, 2000).

Needless to say, staying at an hotel will not necessarily quarantine these:

Had we known a team of American College footballers were staying there (our hotel) at exactly the same time as us, we might have been quite perturbed about our sleep patterns (McAleer, McKenzie and Oxley, 1998).

... particularly if you venture to the dubious areas behind the central station, where unwittingly of course, a number of conferees had booked hotels in what remains of the red-light district. (Sayer and George, 1988).

But you should at least be protected from cold showers in the middle of winter, see Oxley (1988).

Commandment 4: Be religious about the social program

Attend as many of the social functions as possible. You will surprisingly learn a lot more about the profession, and those in it, than from attending the academic program. Check whether food and drink are available at the conference reception(s), and make sure to check the cost. A few examples may support these suggestions.

The food was rather lavish and disappeared quickly, since many of us had already discovered the rather daunting prices of Copenhagen restaurants ... The speed at which people were eating provided an interesting

illustration of the problems that occur when property rights are ill defined. (Sayer and George, 1988)

Under no circumstances should you assume that the receptions will be a substitute for a full meal, unless you can subsist on liquid refreshments alone.

There seemed to be some confusion on the nature of the 'evening meal' and many delegates were under the impression that the wine and finger food reception was to be followed by something more substantial — they were to be disappointed. (Oxley, 1997)

Foreigners were soon to learn that Japanese receptions start and finish exactly on time ... Copious quantities of drinks were available right up to the end of the reception ... but the quantity of food was insufficient. Those who thought that they might be able to avoid the cost of a Tokyo dinner by attending the cocktail party soon discovered that a visit to a Tokyo restaurant was still in order. What happened was an orderly stampede for the food, and a lot of time spent queuing ... Forget about seconds (some even missed firsts) and a visit to a Tokyo restaurant was again mandatory. (McAleer and McKenzie, 1996)

Consider the costs of lunches and other meals which have not been included in the registration fee (such as lunches at US\$25.00 per head in Hawaii Oxley, 2001).

Don't believe everything you read in the conference programme for example,

The first social event, advertised rather grandly as a 'Cocktail Party', (although there did not seem to be any cocktails!) ... (McAleer, McKenzie and Oxley, 1998)

However, remember others may have longer and more detailed memories of events than you do.

These guys have drunk too much white wine, so their brains are not working properly. (McAleer, McKenzie and Oxley, 1998).

One of the spectacles of the night was a prominent Australian macro-economist drinking beer directly from a large beer bottle, because 'they had run-out of beer glasses' (but not wine glasses)! (McAleer and McKenzie, 1996)

Commandment 5: Demand edited conference proceedings

For those who have organised conference proceedings volumes, it is well known that it takes very little marginal effort relative to the organisation of the conference itself. These proceedings should be edited and fully refereed, with appropriate ISBN numbers. Conference proceedings volumes are an accountable measure of research performance in many disciplines, and can be especially important for early career researchers. Check the members of the Conference Program Committee, the Conference Scientific Committee, the Conference Editorial Committee, the Local Organising Committee and, if relevant, the Conference Fundraising Committee (the members of the last committee are

particularly important are they should be keeping the cost of the conference at a manageable level for the conference delegate) to determine if they are nominal members or are likely to contribute to the smooth organisation of the conference.

Commandment 6: Seek out keynote speakers

Keynote and other invited speakers put on their socks one at a time, just like the contributed paper presenters. You should attend these plenary sessions, not only because you are almost certainly contributing towards their participation, but also because keynote speakers have been invited for a purpose. The conference registration fee will typically include a component for paying the keynote and other invited speakers, especially if the local organisers have not raised any funds of their own! Make the most of your financial contribution to the conference.

Commandment 7: Do not rescue alcohol from the conference dinner

Under no circumstances should this Commandment be ignored. Do not even think about rescuing full or even partially full bottles of beer or whisky from the conference dinner. [Believe it or not, this has been known to happen!] Ignoring this Commandment can have a bigger impact on the reputations of transgressors than any academic paper they will ever write.

Commandment 8: Solicit local knowledge about taxi fares and travel arrangements

This Commandment is especially appropriate for users of taxis from the airport or railway station to the conference venues in certain (if the truth be told, many) countries (you know what we are talking about). It is recommended that this local knowledge be ascertained before entering the taxi. Problems may also arise before one gets to the railway station/airport. A few examples may show we are not joking.

Perhaps it is supposed to be common knowledge to many, but it certainly was not known to a British Rail 'information officer' at Heathrow Airport (or to me) that the University of Warwick is, in fact, in Coventry and not the town of Warwick. My only (mild) consolation was that I was not alone. (McAleer, 1991).

Paolo (Zannetti) admitted he nearly missed the Meetings altogether as he did not realise he needed a visa to visit Australia. (Oxley, 1996)

The start of the first session was delayed because the first speaker had gone to Reading rather than Stoke. (Oxley, 1997)

However, no strategy is foolproof:

Arriving at Nottingham University in the evening of 29 March was like boarding the Marie Celeste: a deserted campus with no signposting to the

conference, no-one had even heard of the Royal Economic Society and no-one on the registration desk. (George, 1999).

Commandment 9: Avoid photographers at conference receptions

This Commandment is particularly pertinent for those who have a tendency to become emotional at mixed gatherings. With the advent of digital cameras and the publication of photographs in leading academic journals, we cannot over-emphasize how careful a conference delegate ought to be.

Some conferences organise official web-sites for photographic records for example MODSIM99 photographs can be viewed¹ at:

<http://pacific.photoisland.com/servlet/com.arcsoft.LoginNew?com=arcsoftBanner&awp=index3.html&DIRECT=show>

Other outlets include academic journals for example, *Econometric Theory* that occasionally publishes photographs from workshops/conferences. However, many of the most incriminating circulate only via email.

Commandment 10: Believe published conference reviews

Conferences are not reviewed because the reviewers have nothing better to do. Following this Commandment will enable you to gauge some idea of what conferences can really be like. [There are some genuine stomach-churning events that can, and do, occur at academic conferences. Needless to say, the existence of libel laws has prevented some of the more lurid, breathtaking and honest accounts of social activities at conferences from ever seeing the light of day.]

The conference reviews published in this journal are given in the list of references. Most are humorous, and virtually all are exceedingly diplomatic and muted in their criticisms of conference (dis)organisation. Above all, each review is alarmingly true!

Epilogue

As virtually all of the Ten Commandments for Organising a Conference presented in McAleer (1997) are routinely ignored by conference organisers, we would expect a similar response to these Ten Commandments for Attending a Conference. You do so at your peril. You have been warned.

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Disclaimer

In the event of any legal complications arising from these Ten Commandments, each author intends to blame the other.

Notes

1. Use internet Explorer and login as modsim99 with password modsim99.

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