

# HAWAI'I CONFERENCE ON BUSINESS OR HAWAI'I CONFERENCE BUSINESS?

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This is our first time and yeah, we made some mistakes. (Terry Gregson, Program Coordinator).

## 1. Overview

What makes a successful conference? I guess it depends which side of the fence you are on, delegate or organiser. With around 450 delegates from 50 countries attending the University of Hawaii endorsed conference, *Hawai'i Conference on Business*, held at the Sheraton Waikiki, 14–17 June, 2001, the organisers were very pleased. One of the local organisers interviewed on a local TV network was asked what he expected of the conference. He replied: 'We "kinda hope" they spend their money here and come back next year'.

However, you would also assume that the organisers would 'kinda want' to create a successful conference for delegates. Michael McAleer listed his *Ten Commandments* for the running of a successful conference in McAleer (1997), and over many years I have reported on numerous gatherings of academics, see McAleer and Oxley (2001) for a list. Over such a period I have attended excellent conferences and others not so good. However, almost every written and unwritten rule on successful conference design seems to have been broken by the organisers of this conference with dire consequences.

Perhaps my expectations were too high? However, with a conference registration fee of US\$350–380 and the apparent endorsement of the University of Hawai'i, I 'kinda thought' this was a serious academic event. My expectations seemed to be matched by all the delegates I spoke to. The conference www page: <http://www.hcb.hawaii.edu/cfp.htm> seemed to suggest there might be papers in up to 35 areas of business, calling for 'research papers, abstracts, student papers, case studies, work in progress and reports on issues related to teaching business'. However, I and all the delegates I spoke with, were generally 'disappointed' with the conference organisation and organisers. Delegates, overall, were generally 'quite happy' with the content of papers presented at the sessions (or 'seesions' as many seemed to be called), but once again, it was often how they were arranged in

the programme. The following diary of events might help you understand why 'very disappointed' was the predominant view of the conference.

## 2. What you got

The conference was scheduled as a three and a half-day event. For your US\$350 you received the following: a cotton conference 'shopping bag', an 87 page conference program, a (choice of) conference badge, access to three breakfasts (Thursday–Saturday, but not Sunday ...), access to one buffet lunch (the day randomly selected from Thursday–Saturday, with additional lunch access tickets available for purchase at US\$25 each), access to all sessions. Tea, coffee, soft-drinks, fruit, biscuits, were available daily, morning and afternoon. For an additional US\$50, a cd rom of conference papers (max. 20 pages per paper) could be purchased in advance for collection at the conference. The option of a hard copy of the proceedings at US\$50 was not available, as advertised, at the conference although it was suggested to me by one of the organisers that 'if I sent him an email next week he would make this available to me at a 'nominal charge'. Guess those who paid US\$50 for the cd may be a little annoyed by this. It also transpired that the registration fee also gave access to an 'Hawai'ian Music, Hula Show and Reception' ('similar' to that held at most hotels nightly) on the final evening of the conference. Drinks were available, but only if purchased at the bar, and food seemed to be wildly under catered, see Commandment 4: Be Religious About the Social Program, in McAleer and Oxley (2001). There was no 'Opening Reception', 'Conference Official Opening' on the first day, or 'Conference Dinner'. There was virtually no access to email (three terminals in the Sheraton) and what there was, was expensive at around US\$6.00 for 15 minutes. Authors were given no instructions about whether to bring hard-copy papers to the conference. Most like me brought nothing assuming the organisers had this under control. Big mistake. With only a cd rom for those who paid US\$50 in advance (and no computers for viewing) this meant many sessions were hard to follow and even harder to present. There were no publisher's representatives or displays, social events (other than the Opening/Closing? Reception) or information of 'what to do in Hawai'i'?, provided by the organisers. There was a 'Miss Designer Body Physique Contest' being held at the Sheraton on the Thursday evening, with many of the contestants circulating around the business conference coffee/tea facilities during the day. However, I assume this was pure coincidence and seemed more of an annoyance to the female conference delegates who had to 'cut their way through hairspray and quick-tan spray' to use the conference restrooms.

For accommodation I opted for the 'cheaper' Sheraton room package at US\$85 per night (plus taxes). Most delegates seemed to chose to stay at the conference venue where the bookings were arranged via the conference www page. However, I had not expected to share my room with a 'farm tractor with a broken gearbox', otherwise known as an air-conditioning unit. Others had similar experiences in the 'The Wing' making attempts to move in this part of the hotel rather futile. I had contemplated an upgrade (another US\$70 per night), but felt that 'Sleepless in

Waikiki' would be easier to handle than an explanation to my Dean on my return of why my accommodation bill 'jumped-up' US\$500+ over my budget. However, the views from most of the rooms where sessions were held (level 2 of the Sheraton) were truly amazing. Typically, one whole wall of the room was glass looking onto variously Waikiki beach and/or Diamond Head mountain. Of course, I only experienced these views before and after the presentations.

### 3. The Conference

A word I came to use commonly around the conference was 'bizarre'. I first used it when scanning the 87 page conference programme. You always check to see if you are listed as a delegate and then check who else is attending. 'Bizarrely' delegates were ordered in the index by first name, or even first initial! 'Hi, 'C' my name is 'Les'. No affiliation was attached either in the index or in the session information (except on the name badge). I'm still unclear where most delegates came from and cannot hope to contact those who's papers I could not attend although the title might have looked interesting. Bizarre that sessions started at 8:00 am when breakfast was scheduled for 7:30–9:30 am. Bizarre that coffee breaks were not breaks, but occurred during sessions. These breaks are usually where people congregate and talk, but with sessions in progress these opportunities were minimised, not maximised. Bizarre, that some sessions had three papers from the same author (who also chaired), while others had only one paper per session. Lets' now throw-in 'extraordinary', as there were no Keynote speakers or Plenary sessions at the conference. A variation on Commandment 6: Seek Out Keynote Speakers of McAleer and Oxley (2001) might be 'check there are keynote speakers on the programme' as they normally indicate a serious academic programme has been planned. Furthermore, there were no workshops or student sessions as intimated on the conference www page.

The conference 'sessions' began at 8:00 am on Thursday morning with 10, 50 minute concurrent sessions on accounting, agriculture, economics, education, finance, international business, marketing, management (x2), and tourism and climate change! This combination of sessions (excluding tourism and climate change) was repeated for most iterations of offerings on the 3.5 days with occasionally others added including, technology, entrepreneurship, ethics, travel, and health administration. However, the session topic titles often were no more than rough guides to what one might encounter. 'I don't know why I'm in this session as I'm an accountant'. 'I'm not an economist either'. (This was a discussion between two of three presenters in an economics session.) Most 50 minute sessions seemed to include three presenters (if they all turned-up), giving around 16.5 minutes per speaker including questions. Not enough time especially when most delegates had not seen either a paper or abstract for the papers. It almost seemed a blessing when presenters were 'no-shows' leaving a reasonable 25 minutes per paper. Of course, if the paper 'no-show' was the one you wanted to hear, the result was less satisfactory.

In addition to the 'regular' offerings, the programme advertised two 'special sessions'. On Thursday, 11:00–11:50 am the programme advertised a 'Session Topic: Agriculture (Asopa special Session)' where all I could see to explain this was that the first presenter was V.N.Asopa talking on 'Establishing cool chains for fruits and vegetables'. Right on man. The programme also advertised a 'Special Session in Portuguese', Saturday, 8:00 am–2:30 pm. I did not attend.

The atmosphere of uncertainty, surprise and disbelief created by the conference organisation seemed to upset, frustrate, annoy, aggravate, or cause bouts of uncontrollable laughter in a number of delegates. 'Have you seen this one ... you'll never believe this!'

Not knowing whether presenters were going to turn-up at sessions caused uncertainty for chairs of sessions (surely, the organisers knew who would be a 'no-show' and could inform session chairs and prospective attendees before they chose which presentations to attend?). Each room had a list of papers that (apparently) would be presented that day, but it was obviously drawn from the published rather than actual programme.

However, I did attend some interesting sessions, collected a few business cards to ask for copies of papers and talked at length about the conference organisation.

#### 4. Classic quotes

It has become something of a tradition in conference reports published in this *Journal* to report some classic quotes. This review is no exception.

This is our first time and yeah, we made some mistakes. (Terry Gregson, Program Coordinator)

We kinda hope they spend their money here and come back next year (Terry Gregson, Program Coordinator talking on local TV about what he wants to achieve for the conference).

I don't know why I'm in this session as I'm an accountant. I'm not an economist either (Discussion between two of three presenters in an Economics session).

She had tenure and I don't. (Comment by presenter about why she had chosen a particular survey design. The 'she' was her co-author.)

Can anyone tell me what I'm supposed to do as Session Chair? I've just arrived today and I see from the program I'm chairing my own session.

Are all the presenters here? Well, that's something. I've been to some sessions with three presenters and only one has turned-up. (A common comment and a variation on 'No one turned up to the session I went to today ...').

Couldn't you have thought of a longer title for your paper? Derek Bosworth chairing a paper entitled: 'Degrading the business environment in an indigenous society: A case study of the proposed Cordillera Autonomous Region in the Philippines'. (You decide).

It will cost you \$20 if you try and leave the room now. (Comment from session chair to me as I attempted to leave a sparsely attended session.)

I can get a trip to Hawai'i if I do that. (Comment by presenter about why he wrote his paper.)

Sunday morning was like a ghost-town. (Comment about the lack of people attending the Sunday morning sessions).

## 5. Conclusion

Organising a good conference is easy. Organising an excellent one is somewhat harder, but certainly not impossible or expensive. Reading the *Ten Commandments for Organising a Conference* by McAleer (1997) might be a sensible place for any new conference organiser to start. A number of other 'Conference Reviewers' for this *Journal* and I, have organised international conferences as well as attended many more as delegates. What makes for a successful conference is partly hard work, partly good help, but mainly knowing what a conference should be about and thinking *how you would feel as a delegate if presented with your proposed programme?*

The trendy management speak of 'networking' (or as I once knew it simply talking and meeting people) is, in part, what conferences are about. They are also about sharing new ideas, meeting new and old friends who may subsequently become collaborators or visitors to your institution. It seems 'incredible' therefore, that we as delegates were told nothing about our fellow scholars. For me to talk to 'Jim Jones' because I wanted a copy of his paper, I had to find 'Jim Jones' or someone who knew him. This is plain silly when a list of email addresses could have been created from information requested by the organisers when registering. Any privacy issues can be addressed (should they arise) by receiving a waiver from delegates.

Opening receptions are not just about food and drink, (see Commandment 4: Be Religious About the Social Program in McAleer and Oxley, 2001), they are about meeting people before the academic sessions begin to create a conference atmosphere which differs from 'holiday mode' or work. The conference opening by Vice-Chancellor, Dean, Prime Minister, President, etc., is not just a Public Relations exercise. When done well it sets the scene for the days to follow. It introduces delegates to the theme of the conference. It celebrates, even blesses the success of the conference. To simply start at 8:00 am on Thursday (when most people were at breakfast) seems to miss a fundamental ingredient of an academic meeting.

It would not be a bad idea for the organisers to read about a few successful conferences reported in earlier volumes of this *Journal*. A list of references are provided in McAleer and Oxley (2001). Really, it's not that hard to get a conference more-or-less right. Extracting the final 10% is harder, but most would settle for 90% delegate satisfaction levels. However, for this to occur academic issues and delegate satisfaction must take absolute priority. Was the central idea

of this convention a 'Business Conference' or was it as it a front for a 'Conference Business'?

## 6. Epilogue

It appears that, buoyed with the 'success' of this years event, a 2002 *Hawai'i Conference on Business* is planned and even possibly a 'spin-off' academic journal edited by the conference organisers. Would I attend another Hawai'i Conference on Business? Clearly Hawai'i as a place is a major draw for any event especially for those of us in a Southern Hemisphere winter. However, credible academic conferences are based upon creating an atmosphere conducive to achieving genuine scholarly goals. Location should be secondary to content, theme and organization and regarded as a bonus, (see Commandment 1: Do Not Choose a Conference on Location Alone, in McAleer and Oxley, 2001). I would need to be *seriously* convinced that the organisers of any future event have identified these goals and sought to achieve an atmosphere conducive to likely *academic* success before sacrificing my precious time again.

## 7. References

- McAleer, M. (1997) The Ten Commandments for organising a conference, *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 11, 231–33.
- McAleer, M. and Oxley, L. (2001) The Ten Commandments for attending a conference, *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 15, 671–78.