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## Some Like it Hot, Some Like it Cold: A Day in the Life of a Conference Planner

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# Some Like it Hot, Some Like it Cold:

## A Day in the Life of a Conference Planner

by Robin Beerbower  
Salem Public Library



“**B**ut they made me turn down the heat in the Cowlitz\* room last session and now they are saying it's too cold??” I whined. Welcome to the world of conference planning and management, where the rooms are never the right temperature and proper bathroom maintenance and repair (especially the ladies’) is paramount.

I was the vice-chair for the Oregon Library Association’s 2005 conference and this is my story.

I began my relationship with the OLA conference in June 2004 when I was thrilled to learn the 2006 conference would be held at the new conference center in my hometown of Salem. I have attended many state conferences in my 30-plus-year library career, but other than co-organizing a pre-conference five years ago, I had never been involved in the planning. I thought 2006 would be a good year to offer my services to the conference committee. The next thing I knew I was hearing my name and the words “Conference Chair for 2006.” I panicked. “I can’t do this! I’m a paraprofessional who does outreach services and readers’ advisory.

What do I know about conference planning??” But after many reassurances of help, support, and a few ego-boosting compliments from the library director and other library staff, I began to think I could rise to the challenge.

So I entered a required “apprenticeship,” serving as the 2005 vice-chair. In August 2004, with knees quaking, I attended my first conference meeting. Over the next eight months, I learned just about all there is to know about conference planning. We chose programs, assigned liaisons, and managed equipment requests and costs. I learned what to do when I felt like hiding in a corner because a program was cancelled shortly before the conference, and how to smooth things over when the hotel coffee shop had to be substituted for an out-of-commission meeting room. Most of all, I learned that attending a conference and helping to plan a conference are two entirely different experiences.

### Thursday, April 7: Taking the Cake 7:00 a.m.

Cindy Gibbon, the 2005 conference chair, and I were in the conference office bright and early to ensure all was ready for the day. As committee members trickled in, rubbing their eyes and sipping giant cups of coffee, we began psyching ourselves for the day. Surrounded by computers, printers, white boards, flip charts, easels and data projectors, we examined the schedule and figured out our assignments. I grabbed my ever-present equipment grid and hurried downstairs to the atrium to check on the rooms and additional equipment requests. After making arrangements with the hotel staff to remove or add wireless mikes, podiums, tables, etc., I made a quick dash into the rest room where I discovered a stall door was missing. Yikes! I immediately notified the hotel staff and, happily, they were quick to respond.

\*Meeting room names have been changed to protect the innocent.



**8:30 a.m.**

I ran back to the conference office to quickly check my e-mail, then rushed to the banquet room for Mike Eisenberg's rousing and inspiring keynote speech.

**10:00 a.m.**

It was no-conflict exhibits time, but I had no time to peruse the vendors. I dashed to the atrium to ensure the directional signs by PedCo, the exhibits set-up company, were in place. I decided to check the coffee shop-turned-meeting room one more time. When I entered, the aroma of bacon and pancakes lingered but the staff had removed the tables and set it up as a meeting room with a black curtain across the arched doorway. I was asked to open the curtain and as I did, the metal pipe frame came crashing down on my head. I took a moment to be sure there was no real damage and ran off to check in with my assigned room and presenters, and to do an attendance count.

**12:30 p.m.**

Lunch! Woody Allen was once quoted as saying, "The food here is terrible, and the portions are too small." (Remember the polenta in 2004?) I am happy that this quote could not have applied to the 2005 banquet food. In fact, the quote could have been, "The food here is terrific, and the portions are too big!" It was amusing to read one attendee's evaluation comment on the lunch, "... I would avoid dessert if it weren't sitting there so pretty."

As I wolfed down my chicken wrap and watched the special awards presentation, my mind was also tracking what needed to be done for the afternoon programs. I was a little chagrined to have to miss the OLA presidential candidates' speeches, but room checking duty called.

**1:50 p.m.**

After I tried to troubleshoot a couple of technology issues (I eventually had to call

our tech wonder, Doug Hanke), I did the room count and noted it on the monitor report in the office. I was just checking my computer for e-mail when a committee member rushed into the office to report that the Cowlitz room was too cold, the same room that had been too warm the session before. I sighed, took care of the thermostat (again), then on my way back to the office ran into the banquet chef. I asked if the chocolate spoon cake would be served for Friday's lunch as I hadn't been able to eat a piece the night before. He appeared concerned and ten minutes later a hotel staff member delivered an entire chocolate cake to the conference office—compliments of the chef! After I ate a giant piece, I was energized enough to hit the floor again.

**3:00 p.m.**

Since I hadn't had time to visit the exhibits earlier in the morning, I zipped over to introduce myself to the vendors and promote next year's conference site. Since I can never resist a shopping opportunity, I purchased a few trinkets to haul back home. I grabbed a cookie from the coffee break table and headed back to the atrium to again check on rooms and liaisons, and then introduce the presenter for the 4 p.m. session. As much as I wanted to stay and listen to Leigh Anne Jasheway-Bryant, one of Oregon's funniest people, I had more chores to do.

**5:30 p.m.**

I quickly checked all of the rooms to ensure they were cleared for the OLA business meetings, then I sat—finally—to enjoy the Outreach Round Table meeting.

**6:00 p.m.**

After the meeting, I rushed back to the hotel room to quickly change into a nicer outfit in preparation for the President's reception. After turning in my ticket for an icy margarita, I settled in to see if I would



win a raffle prize. After chatting with a few colleagues, it was time for the banquet, where I was lucky enough to sit next to Molly Gloss, the featured speaker.

9:00 p.m.

I made a brief stop at the PNLA Leadership reception, then found myself back in the conference office fine-tuning my own presentation for the next morning. Back in September, I had agreed to give a readers' advisory session on nonfiction for fiction readers and hadn't quite finished annotating my book talks. It occurred to me that trying to prepare a presentation and play a major part on the conference committee might not have been such a good idea.

10:30 p.m.

I finished my notes and hit print—only to find that the printer was not working. Oh well. Handwritten notes would have to do.


11:00 p.m.

Cindy returned to the hotel room. We discussed the day and plans for the morning before going to sleep, gathering our strength so we could wake up and do it all over again.

#### What I Learned

I learned that a major conference committee member doesn't have much time to attend sessions, but the skills learned far outweighed any presentation or session attended. I also learned that the conference cannot be planned and organized by a single person. It requires a cadre of dedicated people from all kinds of libraries who are willing to give up a major amount of time to ensure the conference is a success. I also learned what really goes on behind the scenes and the sheer number of details that are being managed in order for everything to run smoothly. Even though the days were long and at times I felt frustrated, frantic, and exhausted, I was also exhilarated and challenged, and I had fun.

But you know the most important lesson I learned? Whenever I attend a conference, I will never, ever, complain about the room temperature!

I hope to see you at the 2006 conference, April 5–7, at Salem's beautiful new conference center! 

#### About the Author

Robin Beerbower has been on the staff at Salem Public Library for more than thirty years. Her many duties include serving as the outreach librarian for the home bound patron program, working the reference desk at the West Salem Branch, and managing service accounts for the library's ISP, OPEN.org. Robin's favorite library duty is readers' advisory, for which she showed an early affinity, presenting her first book talk during show-and-tell in the first grade.

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