

Crowd of Strangers: ALA Conferences

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Editors Note: This is the second in a series of articles on Professional Survival. Neosha A. Mackey is personnel librarian, the Ohio State University Libraries, Columbus, Ohio.

When you go to your first ALA meeting, it may seem at first that everyone *except* you knows everyone else. Don't worry; the people who seem to know everyone are just more experienced at standing around and making small talk. The first time or two at an ALA meeting can be a devastating and alienating experience if you haven't yet learned how to get involved and how to get acquainted with people.

Keep in mind that there is no way you can know all the people who go to ALA conferences. It helps, though, to have at least one "resource" person available at first. Resource people have been to ALA meetings before, know their way around, and are willing to help others get a foot in the door. Go to some meetings and parties with them and hang around the congregating area with them (this last is sometimes called lobby sitting). In this way, you will meet other experienced people and have someone to say hello to. Wear your name tag and become adept at reading other people's tags; you may spot someone whom you've wanted to meet.

Plan your stay at ALA so that you benefit from the meetings and other activities—but don't overdo it! Choose two or three meetings a day that really interest you and attend them. If these are program meetings, try to sit at the front (good for recognizing people on the program later and commenting on the issues), and meet the people sitting around you. At committee meetings, visitors often sit around the perimeter of the room, but they may be asked to introduce themselves and participate. Attending a committee meeting and showing sincere interest can lead to an appointment later on.

Go to some of the *official* conference functions such as the President's Program, membership meetings, and receptions. There you will see (and meet) ALA officers, the Librarian of Congress, and other library notables. Receptions frequently are held in interesting places, and they provide a nice way to fill an evening *and* have a good time.

Don't overlook the exhibits. If you would like to see the latest in on-line systems, book detection outfits, and other library equipment, plus all those new books, the exhibits are the place. You might even pick up an invitation to a hospitality

suite. (I got over feeling embarrassed about carrying bookbags and posters long ago!)

Two activities I have tried to attend are Council meetings and my library school reunion. It's educational if nothing else for an ALA member to attend a Council meeting. The Council is the governing body of ALA, and members should know how it operates. Moreover, going to a Council meeting is like visiting the House or Senate—it gives you something to talk about. Library school reunions are good places to renew acquaintances and meet new people with whom you have at least one thing in common.

If you do all these things, you are likely to be exhausted if you aren't careful. You can also spend a lot of money. Take care of yourself; get enough sleep; eat properly (my rule is to try to eat as I do at home); and don't schedule yourself for five things at once! To save money, room with others; take with you essential items like coffee, tea, juice, crackers; and ride the shuttle buses (annual conference) to save on taxis.

Your most important asset at an ALA conference is a *resource person*. This person can show you the ropes, introduce you to lots of people, and be a friendly, secure face in that crowd of strangers. Get one if you can before you go to your first ALA meeting! (OK, experienced people, offer to be a resource person.) Good luck—perhaps we'll run into each other in the lobby. ■■

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