

Rethinking the federation conference model

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Summary: Rethinking the Federation Conference Model

The session encouraged Federation leaders to “**empty your cup**”—set aside preconceived ideas and be open to new approaches for conducting Federation conferences. The goal was not to prescribe one solution, but to share alternatives, experiences, and tools that could help Federations better engage chapters, younger members, national-only members, and emerging leaders.

1. Why Rethink the Traditional Conference?

The traditional model is generally a **multi-day, in-person conference**, often held annually or every other year. It typically includes:

- Keynote speakers
- Officer training and breakout sessions
- Exhibitors and vendors
- Awards and recognition
- Fundraising
- Meals and social activities
- A chapter or local host

However, attendance has been declining. Travel costs, age and mobility considerations, time commitments, and limited interest among national-only and younger members make the traditional model less effective for reaching the broader membership.

2. Conference Requirements

The NARFE bylaws require each Federation to hold an **annual meeting**, but the annual business meeting does not necessarily have to be the same thing as a large convention or conference. Separating the required annual meeting from a larger educational/conference event may provide Federations with more flexibility.

3. Alternative Conference Formats

Several alternatives were discussed:

- **Shorter one- or two-day conferences**
- **Hybrid conferences** combining in-person and virtual participation
- **Fully virtual meetings**
- **Regional meetings** rather than one statewide event
- Smaller workshops and interactive sessions
- Using recordings or presentations that chapters can later share
- Holding preparatory Zoom sessions before the conference
- Considering different days or times of year to improve attendance

The central message was to **experiment rather than automatically repeat the traditional model**.

4. Make Conferences Interactive

A major recommendation was to move away from lecture-heavy agendas toward **workshops, roundtable discussions, peer learning, and hands-on activities**.

Examples included:

- Table discussions with designated facilitators
- Participants reporting their key takeaways
- Officer-specific training
- Computer and technology workshops
- Sessions explaining chapter-president responsibilities
- Volunteer and leadership-development sessions
- Icebreakers and games such as organizational “Jeopardy”

The objective is for participants to **leave with something useful they can apply immediately.**

5. Prepare New Attendees

New members can feel overwhelmed by organizational terminology, acronyms, and structure. Suggestions included:

- A pre-conference Zoom orientation
- Explaining NARFE's organizational structure and terminology
- A buddy system pairing newcomers with experienced members
- Clearly explaining session expectations and takeaways in advance

This preparation can make first-time attendees feel more comfortable and connected.

6. Measure Success Differently

Attendance alone should not determine whether a conference is successful. Federations should establish **clear objectives and metrics** before the event.

Possible measures include:

- Number of attendees
- Participation by national-only members
- Participation by younger members
- New volunteers or leaders identified
- Member satisfaction
- Workshop participation
- Post-conference feedback
- Whether attendees actually use what they learned

The key question is: **Did the conference accomplish what the Federation wanted it to accomplish?**

7. Technology and Hybrid Meetings

Technology was identified as one of the biggest challenges to alternative formats. Hybrid meetings can be expensive and technically difficult, particularly when virtual participants cannot hear or participate effectively.

Recommendations included:

- Identify a **technology-savvy member or “tech guru”**
- Assign someone specifically to manage virtual participation
- Test equipment before the event
- Consider 360-degree cameras, microphones, and conference-room equipment
- Use platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams
- Put the meeting date and time clearly in the subject/header of electronic invitations
- Make meeting links easy to access

One Federation reported spending approximately \$3,000 on professional hybrid technology but receiving only 19 virtual registrations, demonstrating that **cost versus participation must be carefully evaluated**.

8. Accessibility and Cost

Accessibility should be considered when selecting venues. Important considerations include:

- Single-level or easily accessible facilities
- Accessible guest rooms
- Convenient access between sleeping rooms and meeting spaces
- Reasonable travel requirements
- Affordable registration
- Meals and other costs

The discussion emphasized that even seemingly minor accessibility problems can create major difficulties for attendees.

9. Fundraising and Alzheimer's

Alzheimer's fundraising has historically been an important part of NARFE activities. It was explained that Alzheimer's research was selected by the NARFE membership as the organization's charity of choice, and NARFE has contributed **more than \$17 million to Alzheimer's research since 1985**.

Participants also discussed allowing chapters to maintain a broader **community-service focus**, supporting Alzheimer's fundraising while also assisting other local causes.

10. Vendors and Sponsorships

Federations are experiencing varying degrees of success attracting vendors and advertisers. Suggestions included:

- Designating a **vendor/sponsorship chair**
- Building long-term relationships with healthcare and community partners
- Personally contacting potential sponsors
- Giving vendors meaningful visibility during the conference
- Using business expos and community contacts to identify sponsors
- Maintaining relationships with vendors even when their companies or positions change
- Considering alternatives to expensive printed conference books

The overall lesson was that sponsorship often requires **personal outreach and relationship building**.

11. Conference Planning Tools

A project-management approach was recommended to organize the many tasks involved in a conference. **ProjectLibre**, an open-source project-management program, was mentioned as a free alternative for developing timelines, assigning responsibilities, tracking deadlines, and organizing documents.

The same approach could be used for other Federation projects, including fundraising and community activities.

12. Networking and Relationships Remain Important

Even with virtual options, participants emphasized that **face-to-face interaction still has significant value**. Conferences provide opportunities to:

- Build relationships
- Exchange ideas
- Learn from other Federations
- Develop institutional knowledge
- Identify future leaders
- Create a network of people who can help one another

Overall Takeaway

The strongest message of the session was:

Don't simply repeat the conference model because “that's how we've always done it.”

Federations should identify their goals, understand what members want, consider cost and accessibility, experiment with different formats, use technology strategically, and emphasize **interaction, learning, networking, and leadership development**.

The ultimate goal is not simply to hold a conference—it is to create an experience that **engages members, develops future leaders, strengthens relationships, and provides meaningful value to the entire Federation**.