

How to be a good conference scientist?

Ten Commandments

One learns a great deal about one's fellow scientists in editing the proceedings of a big international conference. Consider one example: the deadline for manuscripts is 1 April. How do the contributors respond? One scientist (Japanese) sends his contribution, beautifully prepared, a month before. Quite a few others turn in their papers on the deadline. Some send mails on 30 March announcing that their manuscripts will follow on 2 April. A large number of authors send papers late, without a word of explanation. Some bring their papers to the conference, six weeks after the deadline, as if they haven't heard of it. One author appears on the last day, hands out his manuscript - written in violation of all the rules - and insults the editor, who does not want to take it. Some come and say they haven't prepared their manuscripts; some don't even come to say that. A well-known participant, asked about his contribution, answers disarmingly: "I was too lazy to prepare it." Quite a spectrum, isn't it? There are, however, other extremes. A contribution arrives on which half of the authors named on the accepted abstract are missing (including the first) and a few others have been added. Whom to believe: the abstract or the paper? Two different versions of the same paper are received, bearing the same title and authors. Clearly, we choose the one typed on a better word processor.

In a letter accompanying his paper an author writes, "We asked for an oral presentation but unfortunately got only a poster." His complaint expresses the widely shared notion that a poster is worth less than an oral presentation. Judging by the very hot discussions during the poster sessions at the Warsaw conference, this opinion is wrong. Successful posters elicited more than 30 preprint requests, no oral presentation drew such a response. It is true that a poster presenter is in a position of a seller on the market, which can be awkward if there are no buyers. One Polish scientist solved the problem by sitting somewhat away from his stand and watching the "buyers" discreetly: Only when somebody better known came by would he approach and advertise his "merchandise".

There has been a lot of talk these days that there are too many conferences and too many publications. One of the participants at the Warsaw conference, who did not submit his invited contribution, said: "I've published it before; why should I do it again? An extended abstract and a list of references would be enough." There are, clearly, more and more conferences, whose organizers need invited speakers and want to publish proceedings. As a result the electronic-paper

mill turns faster and faster. People argue also, not without reason, that a four-page paper in a conference proceedings does not say much and in any case the book will be not widely available, so that one has to publish in a journal anyway.

All this is true, but it is hard to reverse the tide. There most probably will be more and more conferences and publications in the future. Facing the inevitable, here are Ten Commandments for a good conference scientist:

- I. COME TO THE CONFERENCE. (Otherwise, your colleagues might think you do not exist anymore. It's cool to come without a paper. It suggests you've risen pretty high.)
- II. DO NOT SUBMIT AN ABSTRACT IF YOU HAVEN'T DONE AT LEAST 15% OF THE WORK. (It just might get accepted!)
- III. KEEP AT LEAST ONE COMMON AUTHOR - PREFERABLY YOURSELF - BETWEEN THE ACCEPTED ABSTRACT AND THE ACTUAL PAPER. (This will help organizers to identify the work.)
- IV. KEEP THE SAME KEY WORDS IN THE ABSTRACT AND THE PAPER. (You can, of course, reverse your conclusions!)
- V. DIVIDE YOUR WORK AND SUBMIT TWO ABSTRACTS WITH RELATED TITLES AND THE SAME AUTHORS. (The program committee, doing its sacred duty of slashing submissions by half, will accept a combined version. On rare occasions a committee has first combined and then rejected papers, but that's malicious.)
- VI. DO NOT BE AFRAID OF PRODUCING AN ERRONEOUS PAPER. (Nobody will notice it. People don't read papers these days; they just write them.)
- VII. CLAIM YOU'VE OBSERVED SOMETHING BIG. (Even if it is not true, it will keep your name in the limelight for years to come.)
- VIII. AVOID NOMINATING YOURSELF AS AN INVITED SPEAKER; RATHER, ENCOURAGE A FRIEND TO DO IT FOR YOU. (You can return the favor at the next conference.)
- IX. DO NOT SUBMIT MORE THAN FIVE ABSTRACTS. (You will not beat You-Know-Who anyway!)
- X. TRY TO BECOME THE CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS EDITOR ONE DAY. (It's the easiest way to put your name on a book.)



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