

In person meetings - A Vendor's Perspective on PLA 2022

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With the PLA (**Public Library Association**) Conference being a bi-annual event, it seems strange to be writing about PLA 2022 as the first live, in-person conference and exhibition for two years. The first opportunity for a large gathering of librarians to come together, share their experience and best practice, meet and greet friends and colleagues, and meet with a large number of vendors in one place since PLA 2020 in Nashville, Tennessee at the end of February 2020.

Who would have imagined on the 29th February 2020, as delegates departed from Nashville, that the next opportunity for them to meet again would from 23rd to 25th March 2022 be for PLA 2022 in Portland, Oregon and that all other major library conferences and events in between would be either cancelled or moved to being online/virtual conferences as COVID 19 spread around the world and impacted everybody's lives in so many ways. Even though no PLA Conference was cancelled, almost everything else was.

As PLA 2022 approached, uncertainty and doubts remained for all participants. Vendors thought long and hard about committing to the exhibition, with some taking early decisions not to participate, while others significantly reduced their investment and commitment to the conference, reducing booth sizes and lowering the numbers of staff attending. Libraries had to weigh continuing local COVID restrictions and regulations against the need to network, to re-establish continuing professional development opportunities and to interact with vendors and hear about new developments, products and services. Right up to the last minute, people were asking "Will PLA be successful?", "Will people attend?", "Will people want to interact with each other?", "Will PLA be a good use of our time and money?".



As people started to arrive in Portland for the conference and throughout the event, it was very clear that all of these questions would be answered with a resounding “Yes!”. The buzz started before even reaching Portland, with flights into the city full of library professionals and vendors, all talking about how much they were looking forward to the event. Anticipating and planning in person meetings with friends and colleagues that they had only seen on the end of Zoom or Teams meetings for 2 years.

Arriving in Portland the game of “Spot the PLA delegate” started in earnest, even before delegates were issued with their badges, complete with vaccination confirmation sticker, and purple lanyards. Familiar faces were soon appearing around the hotels and restaurants and huddles of delegates were congregating throughout the city, wearing masks indoors as required by the organisers (although not mandated by the city or venue) but gratefully removing them as soon as they were outside in the sunshine – enjoying the fresh air and cherry blossoms.

Once the conference got under way, the excitement and buzz reached a whole new level. As the exhibits opened on Wednesday afternoon the crowds poured into the exhibit hall to renew acquaintances and catch up with vendors from across the USA and further afield. That first 3 hours of the exhibition exceeded all expectations – 3 hours of non-stop conversation, lead generation, customer interaction and relationship building – more interactions than anybody had believed possible and a richer experience than had been seen at any event for many years even before the COVID pandemic arrived.

The buzz and excitement of being able to meet in person was not restricted to the exhibits hall and the conference venue. As the conference continued and some of the more social aspects of the event developed the restaurants and bars of Portland filled up with delegates – many places being booked solid for the evenings of the conference. Through breakfast, lunch, dinner and into the night, local businesses thrived on serving the appetite of delegates to get together, share their experiences of the last 2 years and catch up on relationships that had been restricted to virtual connections throughout COVID.



As we know, the library world is a close-knit community that thrives and survives on the relationships that exist between libraries and the many supporting vendors that provide a diverse range of products and services to those libraries. But, more than anything, those relationships are built on the bonds between the people that run those libraries and develop, install and maintain those products and services that libraries depend on. While technology has enabled a degree of interaction between people, nothing can replace the value of face-to-face meetings, even if wearing masks. PLA clearly demonstrated that the appetite for re-establishing those connections in person is strong.

And, of course, we must not lose sight of what events like PLA mean for the local community. Talking to a Portland Uber driver after the conference, he said how grateful he was that the conference had gone ahead. He acknowledged that it was the first major conference in Portland since the start of the pandemic and he really appreciated that business that it had brought to the city.

Major events such as PLA are not just part of the life-blood of the library and information community, but also play a vital role in the health and vitality of the communities that host these events. As we look forward to more events returning to in-person, live meetings – events such as **UKSG** in Telford in the UK, **ALA** in Washington, DC and **IFLA** in Dublin, Ireland – we can look forward to renewing many more acquaintances and establishing new relationships across our community, as well as supporting more communities as they continue to recover from the impact of the COVID pandemic.

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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