NEWSLETTER

Why I don't mind paying to be in the same room with PEOPLE!

By **Keith Parsons, CWNE #3** · 2026-05-31 · originally on LinkedIn

The value of a conference is what you learn and who you learn it with. That is the whole return. The swag goes in a drawer, the keynote ends up on YouTube anyway, and getting scanned at a booth so a sales rep can chase you to meet their quarterly goals is just paperwork you volunteered for.

I have spent about 25 years in this industry, and I run the Wireless LAN Professionals Conference. I have sat on every side of this, as an attendee, as an instructor, and as the person responsible for whether a few hundred people feel their time and money were well spent. The events that pay off are built around learning. The ones that disappoint are built around lead capture.

The badge-scan economy

Walk a big trade-show floor and you can sort the booths in about ten seconds. Some are there to teach you something. Most are there to scan your badge.

You know the second kind. Someone sizes you up, decides whether your title looks like budget authority, and either starts the pitch or loses interest mid-sentence. You are not a colleague to them. You are a record in a CRM, a lead to be qualified and routed to the correct salesperson to call you. If you cannot turn into a purchase order, the conversation is over.

That transaction pays for a lot of conferences, but it is not why you should go. Attending an event to become someone's lead is paying for the privilege of being marketed to. You can always get marketed to for free.

What you actually came for

The real return is in the conversations nobody scheduled.

It is the hallway track. The engineer who just fought the same roaming problem you are fighting, and tells you what actually worked instead of what the data sheet promised. The person who designed a high-density stadium deployment and will walk you through every mistake they made, because mistakes are the part vendors never put in a webinar. You learn more in twenty minutes next to someone who has done the thing than in an afternoon of polished slides.

These relationships compound. The people you meet at one event become the people you call six months later when you are stuck at 2 a.m. with a capture you cannot make sense of. That network is worth more than anything in a conference bag, and you cannot download it.

RF is physical, so learn it that way

Wi-Fi is a craft, and crafts are learned by doing. RF is physical. It bends around walls, fades across a room, and behaves in ways a PDF will never quite teach you. You learn it by putting hands on gear, by watching how another engineer holds a spectrum analyzer and what they look for.

In-person training gives you what remote cannot. You see other people's setups and their mistakes, which is often the faster teacher. You get to ask the dumb question out loud, in a room of peers, instead of staying quiet in a webinar chat and never finding out. The instructor matters, but so do the fifteen other people learning beside you. Half of what sticks comes from them.

The meeting that does not survive a video call

The same holds for meetings. Video is fine for the routine parts, but trust and nuance are different in person. Sit across a table and you read what someone is not saying, the hesitation before a yes. Hard designs get untangled faster at the same whiteboard, and deals that stall over email close in a hallway.

How to choose

Pick events built around learning, not around capturing you.

Look at where the organizer spends the effort. Is the schedule full of real technical content, hands-on time, and room for people to talk to each other? Or is the agenda thin and the floor

wall-to-wall booths whose job is to collect your contact details? One is selling you knowledge and a community. The other is selling your attention to its sponsors.

This is the test I hold my own event to, and it is the standard I would tell anyone to use before spending a travel budget. Go to learn. Go for the people who will make you better at this work. Walk past the booth that only wants your badge, and go find the engineer who wants to talk about the problem you both can't stop thinking about.

That is what showing up is for.

By Keith Parsons, CWNE #3, Wireless LAN Professionals. Free to read and share. Facts