

YOU WON'T KNOW UNLESS YOU ASK !!!!

(How to request full or at least partial reimbursement to attend a FOCUS Conference.)

By Bob Miglino RRT BSRT MPS

In this era of tight budgets, how can you encourage your employer to pay all or at least *some* of the cost of your attending a conference such as a FOCUS Conference. Here are some tips that can help you gain your employer's approval and the funds to attend.

First and most importantly, begin by asking for a private meeting with your boss in his/her office. This will set the tone to your boss that you are very serious about what you are about to ask for. Do not just casually ask for funds as you pass your boss in the hallway or put him/her on the spot by asking in front of other people, at say, a department meeting. Instead, be very professional throughout the whole process of your requesting financial assistance. At that office meeting, provide a written, printed-out plan (very impressive) to your boss to demonstrate what you will accomplish by attending the conference; not what you "hope" to accomplish, but what you **WILL** accomplish. This plan should minimally include:

1. Your plan to meet other professionals who may share expertise and resources with you.
2. Your plan to learn about solutions other organizations have instituted.
3. Your plan to seek out new clinical modalities, medications or treatment options that might improve patient care, outcomes, reduce length of stay or otherwise save money at your organization.
4. Your plan to learn about new equipment being presented in the conference's exhibit hall.
5. How you will earn continuing education credits for your recertification or renewed license.
6. How you would be willing to come back and share with your colleagues things you learned at the conference (**very impressive**) perhaps via an in-service class.
7. How you will keep an eye out for equipment "specials" at the show that you would be willing to call and brief your boss about, right from the exhibit hall, if need be, in case he/she wishes to act on the savings (this alone could more than pay for the entire costs of you attending).
8. Explain how you feel you will be a better therapist or sleep tech for having attended and how this will benefit the institution.

Remember to request to attend a conference early during your boss's budgetary process, **but by all means, don't consider it too late if you did not**. If your boss says there's simply no money, ask about monies that might be available from any kind of scholarship funds or hospital auxiliary funds. One friend of mine asked his hospital if he could hold a combination bake sale and car wash just for employees. He did and raised over \$800 in one day, charging \$7.50 to wash one's car and by selling cookies!

Next, show your boss how **you've** worked to minimize the costs involved in attending, for example, by sharing a hotel room, by doing research as regards airfares or by sharing travel expenses with colleagues by driving. Show your boss what the conference **includes** and how that saves the institution money over sending you to another conference that doesn't include as much.

If you think you'll be interviewing for a new job over the next month or so, negotiate for conference funding - or at least **ask** about funding before you accept a new position. Try to make annual conference funding a part of your compensation package in taking a job. Plant the seed with your employer that going to an annual conference to stay up-to-date is important to you **and as importantly, good for the institution**. If you're a member of a union, ask your union representative if there are funds available for this purpose. If not, ask your union about making "conference funding" a negotiating demand the next time there are contract negotiations with the institution.

AT THE CONFERENCE ITSELF

Once you're at the conference, record the details of the sessions you attended. Record information such as the speaker and lecture title, issues discussed and how you plan to use the information in your job when you return home. Prepare a short written synopsis of those lectures to give to your boss upon your return or give him/her a copy of the *actual* PowerPoint presentations you attended (**FOCUS provides this on their website and is the only conference that provides the speakers' actual PowerPoint presentation, not just a summary of the talk**). Bring back a copy of the conference program that was distributed at the conference. Bring back sales literature from vendors that had equipment/services in the exhibit hall that your institution might benefit from, or is thinking about, purchasing.

SHARE WHAT YOU LEARN WITH OTHERS

Tell your boss that you will be happy to present an in-service lecture to your coworkers upon your return. (**a major "convincer" for many department heads**). Invite him/her to that in-service and maybe even spring for some light refreshments out of your own pocket as a gesture of appreciation and as a way to make it more of a special class. Take lots of pictures while at the conference to incorporate into the in-service and to show your boss upon your return. Emphasize the networking opportunities that can be gained by attending, i.e., with exhibitors, speakers and professionals from other organizations. Remind your boss that manufacturers exhibiting at the conference often have "show discounts" that can singlehandedly make their paying for your trip, worthwhile. For example, let's say your department is planning to buy new ventilators or pulse oximeters. Often, the savings realized at the conference can *more* than pay for your going. You then get to go free while your institution saves thousands of dollars – a win-win for all. If your institution needs employees, volunteer to bring postings of the job(s) to the conference to post on the employment bulletin board that FOCUS always features. It is free advertising for your institution.

Don't be bashful about tapping your suppliers and sales reps for financial help in attending. Department heads and other managers, especially, can ask reps for a registration for either themselves or a therapist/sleep tech in the department. (Tell those reps that FOCUS offers reduced registration certificates to reps and their companies *precisely for this purpose* and that they simply have to call the FOCUS office at 845- 876-2936 to arrange reduced-fee registrations.) If your department just spent, or is about to spend a lot of money with a company, don't be shy about inquiring about a gratis registration or two. Decision makers especially have the ability to "wrangle" a paid registration from a sales rep that they've done a lot of business with! Not only do those sales-reps get reduced-fee registrations and not only is the price of a reduced registration "small potatoes" in the context of the sale they just made or are about to make to you, but for them, the price of a registration they purchase for you is deductible as a business expense and something they can appropriately do (since it's educational) to thank you for your purchase and/or cement their relationship with you for the future! So definitely ASK !!

Get your Medical Director involved.

Ask him/her to write a letter/memo to your boss that urges him/her to send you to the conference from a "medical perspective" (**very difficult for an administrator to deny**). Department Directors especially can point to the Joint Commission requirement stating that at least the department's manager should have relevant outside training opportunities provided to them, such as conferences. Managers, again, can point to the entire track of lectures FOCUS features in purely management topics.

Use Ingenuity !!!

Figure out alternative ways to raise funds. Besides the "car wash" example above, others have held cake sales or even raffles to raise funds to attend a conference.

But always remember ... in the final analysis, that your entire travel, lodging, food and registration fees involved in going to a professional conference such as the FOCUS conference, are tax deductible. Thus, it may well be worth the *personal* investment in your own career to attend even if you cannot obtain financial help from your employer. While on that note, remember not to give up the ship just because your employer won't pay your *entire* way. Always ask your employer to pay

at least *some* of the way if not all of it; perhaps just the registration fee or maybe just the travel expense with you picking up the rest (later deducting it on your tax returns.). Don't be afraid to diplomatically point out that the institution has rarely or maybe even *never* sent you to a conference before (if that be the case). Also, keep tuned to whether *some* professionals in the organization are being granted funds but not others – perhaps you can make your case on the issue of “fairness” if you must.

Always ASK for funding !! Shockingly, many people, convinced they won't get any reimbursement, don't even ask.

ALWAYS ASK !

Remember also, that FOCUS chooses venues and cities that are fun and interesting to visit – cities and venues that help you combine a professional conference experience with a full-fledged vacation for yourself and your family or at the least, a quickie, (perhaps even a romantic) getaway extended weekend. FOCUS's significant-other reduced registration fee allows your partner to enjoy EVERY aspect of the conference with you for a very reduced fee. This allows your partner to attend lectures if they are interested (perhaps just the keynote addresses if they are not medical people), attend the food and drink events in the exhibit hall and participate in the entertainment events (such as our annual comedy night) ...so, consider that fact as well. In most cases, you might not be able to visit a city and partake in its activities as economically as you can thru FOCUS which negotiates special reduced room and activity rates for its attendees.

The above tips will increase your chances of getting at least some of the money needed, if not all. Good luck - but if you hit a brick wall and cannot get a drop of reimbursement, consider the tax advantages I spoke of above and the opportunity that the FOCUS conference provides for a mini-getaway to a popular venue.

Again, many people, convinced they won't get any reimbursement, don't even ask ! ALWAYS ASK !

Good luck – Hope to see you at a FOCUS conference real soon.

Your Colleague,

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