



Usability Professionals' Association

Conference Preferences Survey Results

During January 2004, we conducted a survey of UPA members about their preferences for conference locations. The immediate goal of the survey was to test some possible locations for the UPA 2006, to be held on the west coast, but this survey also looked at general factors that influence conference attendance.

Who replied to the survey?

There were 345 responses, many from people who have never attended a UPA conference. We did not ask if they were UPA members, but the survey invitation was circulated using an e-blast to the membership.

In 2003, this group attended only one or two conferences, with almost a quarter not attending any more conferences. For almost half, this was a drop in their typical attendance (and for another 44% it was the same number.)

There is an opportunity in the members for whom the UPA conference is not the first one they pick; there are some 17% who chose another event for their one conference in 2003.

UPA Conference Attendance	
Never attended	38%
1 conference	22%
2-3 conferences	25%
4 or more	15%

Conferences in 2003	
No conferences	21%
1 conference	39%
2 conferences	24%
3 or more	15%

* All percentages are the calculated against the responses to the question

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The respondents are as geographically diverse as the membership, with different regions represented in roughly the same proportion as in the full membership . The responses are grouped into broad geographical areas to create groups based on travel distance.

Geographical Location		
	Survey	Membership
Eastern US and Canada*	35%	35%
Central US and Texas	27%	25%
Western US and Canada	24%	20%
Europe and Israel	6%	7%
UK	7%	9%
Asia Pacific	1%	3.5%
South America	--	0.5%

* Includes West Indies

What is important in choosing a conference?

As expected, the content of the conference is easily the most important factor in making a choice, but the overall cost of attending is a close second. Geographical location is a factor, but only in a general way.

	Not important (Bottom 2)	Somewhat important	Very important (Top 2)
Conference Content			
The strength of the presentations and program	1%	5%	93%
How well the program matches your needs	1%	8%	90%
Networking opportunities	10%	26%	64%
Relevance of the conference theme	34%	27%	37%
A "big name" keynote speaker	42%	38%	19%
Convenience and Amenities			
Conference dates	14%	38%	47%
Amenities of the conference venue	39%	39%	21%
Geographical Location and Travel			
General geographical location	14%	23%	61%
A location that appeals to you	22%	24%	51%
Closeness to home	37%	26%	35%
Ability to get a direct flight	36%	28%	33%
Costs			
Overall cost of attending conference	6%	21%	70%
Cost of registration	8%	24%	66%
Cost of travel	10%	26%	62%
Cost of the conference hotel	10%	29%	59%
Cost of meals and extras	22%	31%	45%

A few thoughts that sum up many of the attitudes expressed in the comments:

- UPA Conferences have been good over the past four years that I've attended. As long as they remain to be good, I will keep coming, so it's really how good the previous conference was that determines if I will keep going.

Combining conference travel with personal fun

Many people combine travel to a conference with vacation time: 45% sometimes or always do; 33% do when the location is right, and only 20% never do. They generally prefer vacation time after the conference, but two-thirds will do it either before or after. Most (77%) will at least try to take advantage of airline price discounts for Saturday stay-overs.

The comments on the importance of location are particularly telling in this issue. A more “fun” location is a draw, and people will fight harder for support to attend a conference in a location they like.

There is no clear consensus on what constitutes a “fun” location, but there were a number of comments that mentioned our hot locations very unfavorably. When we look at these comments against the split in type of venue, it seems clear that we need to vary not only the general geographical area, but the type of venue, size of city and climate. One size does not fit all!

Preferred Venue	
Downtown hotel	48%
Resort hotel	34%
Convention or university conference center	27%
A mix from year to year	28%

The question of whether or not to hold the conference in a resort exposes a deep split in the responses: for some, a luxury resort is part of the draw for travelling to a conference; for others it was either too expensive or not business-like enough. Three typical comments are:

- If you hold the conference at a resort, you'll restrict attendance to those who have deep pockets. This would not be the right message to send in an economy when many usability people are struggling. Better a more modest venue that more people can afford, since networking is an important value of attending the conference, possibly the most important to me.
- The resort in Phoenix last year was really gorgeous, but the weather was too hot for me! Also, I like visiting resorts, but I don't feel like I can take advantage of the facilities (pool, etc.) because I am there on business. I still have to work between sessions, and I'm not sure I want my professional colleagues to see me in a bathing suit! :) Also, high-speed internet access in the hotel room is really important.
- Having the UPA conference at the Phoenician was awesome! I really liked the Phoenician - great resort...the kind of place where I would schedule a vacation before or after the actual conference. Let's have it at the Phoenician every year.

Other comments showed similar splits in preferences:

- I have not attended because the venues have been too isolated from their supporting cities and because of the exorbitant cost of meals and lodging at "resort" facilities. CHI's "downtown" venues provide many alternatives to the captive food and lodging of a conference resort (i.e., recent UPA events in Florida and Nevada), as well as providing a huge variety of short vacation options.
- I feel strongly that an appealing "resort" type location is important. I enjoy the amenities of a good hotel and my company seems willing to pay
- Last year Phoenician Hotel made the conference an unforgettable experience. I had the time of my life attending the conference and without any extra cost enjoying my stay without much extra cost. The quality and appeal of the venue are a big motivating factor for me.

- I am not happy with choice of location if: 1) it's in a hot place in the summertime (i.e., in the south or southwest) 2) it's not in a major city or interesting smaller city
- UPA has recently been held in the midst of summer in some torrid climates (las vegas (109 degrees), Scottsdale (extremely hot), etc. I would be much more likely to attend in the future if either the conference was rescheduled to either fall or spring in these locales, or if they were held in more temperate locations in considerably less ostentatious hotels. You just can't do anything but hang around the air-conditioned hotel. For some, that might be ok; for me, it's a total turn-off.
- I am not a fan of resort hotels. I enjoy their beauty but not their luxury. I often admire their level of service but prefer not to take advantage of it (I'm still able to carry my own bags, thank you). The cost is out of sync with the value I accrue from the experience of staying there.
- The Phoenician was obscenely expensive. That might have been OK in the dot.com boom days but in the bust days made staying there impossible.

Who pays for conference attendance?

Three quarters (74%) of the respondents get at least partial support from their company (or another sponsor) to attend conferences. Comments indicate that they are very conscious of the overall value of the conference and their ability to put what they learn to work immediately in making the case to management for funding. Only 10% said they received no funding.

Who pays for conference costs	
Company supported	58%
Partially supported	17%
Self-employed or student	16%
No company support	10%

When we look at who covers conference costs against prior attendance at UPA conferences, it is clear that the self-supported (either because their company does not pay or because they are self-employed or students) are less likely to attend UPA, or any conferences

Prior attendance compared to source of financial support

	Overall	Company Support	Partial support	Self Supported
Never attended UPA	38%	32%	40%	52%
Attended one UPA	22%	26%	18%	15%
Attended more than one	40%	42%	42%	33%

However, in comparing these numbers with the aspects of the decision to attend, it is clear that even for sponsored travel, a good value and the overall costs of attendance is important. We cannot assume that simply because a company is funding attendance that cost is not an issue.

- The most important factor is my employer's willingness to reimburse me for my expenses, and that varies from year to year. If I can't be reimbursed, my chances of attending decline significantly.
- Presentations, tutorials, and workshops that will further my career path, and be relevant to my current job so that the company will feel like they are making a good investment.
- If I can make a good argument to the boss that I need to go because "such and such" topic will improve our services or impact our bottom line, I'm more likely to get the funds to attend.

There is a very vocal minority of the self-employed who have no one to sponsor them and are very conscious of the costs, since they pay them directly. They may tend to attend a conference only if they are speaking or if it is local.

- As a small business owner for a one-person startup, I have to be very mindful of costs. For 2004, I will only attend events close to my home and office

A third group is also vocal in the comments: those from outside of the US. The cost and difficulty of travel overseas is an important factor in their decision. This should be a serious consideration for an international organization.

- Consider holding it in the UK or at other local chapter countries. Not everyone is able to travel aboard to conferences, so occasionally bringing the conference to them would be good recognition of the value of local chapters.

A fourth, smaller, group includes government employees and academics, both of whom work on tight budget restrictions. They indicate a need for close-by cheap hotels.

- Please have the conference at a hotel near others so that I can find a convenient room at government rate. If that's not possible, I can't go.

One question asked about hotel costs and what price per night would make them begin considering other options. Across the board, \$150 is a tipping point, with a solid majority looking for rates of \$150 or under. Those with company support are willing to pay higher prices, but this is offset by the strong wish for lower price (and very low willingness to pay higher prices) of the self-supported and those sharing responsibility for costs.

This price-sensitivity for a large group of members is serious, and is ignored only at a cost to the association. In 2002 and 2003, the conference hotel rates were \$150 and \$160 per room night. In both years, we had significant defection to other hotels; enough in 2003 to cause UPA to have to pay a large penalty.

Maximum hotel rates	Overall	Full company support	Shared Responsibility	No support or self-employed
\$100 or under	22%	13%	28%	42%
\$100 to \$150	42%	41%	45%	43%
\$150 to \$200	36%	17%	15%	8%
\$200 or more	18%	24%	10%	8%
Federal Per Diem	3%	5%	3%	--

* Percentages calculated against the total for each column.

- UPA should do something similar to HFES does, which is provide both a luxury hotel and a cheaper hotel option. Some of us would be more willing and able to attend if the accommodation and travel costs were lower because we're able to negotiate with our employers to pay for the conference registration if we paid for our expenses ourselves.

Choosing a location

Location is an important aspect of conference choice, but usually as a secondary factor to the content of the conference.

- In addition to topics I am interested in, location is my next biggest motivating factor. While I wouldn't attend a conference only based on location, if I was deciding between 2 conferences 2 attend, the right location would win out.

We asked about any travel restrictions, and (not unexpectedly) found that local travel is always easier than long-distance travel. One concern that has often been expressed within UPA is that placing a conference overseas would make it impossible for many people to attend. Based on an analysis of the open responses, this drop-off might easily be balanced by people for whom a European location *is* local, and those for whom it would be an additional draw.

Restrictions on travel	
Difficulty with travel outside of the US	49
Difficulty with travel outside Europe	7
Prefer events close to home	24
Cost issues	26

* Number of comments in this group

- I would like the conference to end on a Sunday rather than a Friday so that I could be assured of getting a cheaper airfare. Also it would take me away from the office for fewer business days. A university or other low cost venue is easier to justify employer sponsorship of fees as it doesn't look like a partial vacation.

There also seems to be a tug-of-war between the individual's desire for a fun location and problems with the conference appearing to be a junket or not serious as a result. One indication of this is the response to Honolulu as a conference location: 43% said it would increase their interest in attending, but 73% said it would decrease their interest. It was the personal first choice for 44% - the highest rating.

Cities with a strong image have a better draw than cities that are simply nice places; large cities are a better draw than small ones (especially when the problems of connecting travel are considered). However, the preference choices are ambiguous at best, with the two "middle choices" (Portland and San Diego) both doing well as second and third choices, even though they did not rank well in the first choices.

Overall, San Francisco is the top draw, but is an expensive city for conference bookings. San Diego scores well with a good second and third choice ranking, and good scores for both increasing and decreasing interest in attending.

City Preferences				Likelihood to...	
	1 st Choice	2 nd Choice	3 rd Choice	Increase	Decrease
San Francisco	33%	25%	17%	64%	23%
San Diego	18%	27%	27%	55%	18%
Honolulu	19%	10%	14%	43%	72%
Denver	18%	19%	20%	43%	30%
Portland	13%	18%	21%	40%	33%
Seattle				54%	20%

Preferences are calculated within the total for each place, rather than across a single city.

Note: Seattle was included in the increase/decrease preferences but was (inadvertently) left off the overall preference question. There were some comments that indicated that Portland was chosen as a substitute. It might also be a strong contender, with rankings similar to San Diego.

Suggestions for locations

Of course UPA members had lots of suggestions. Many questioned why the choices were limited to the west coast. The questionnaire did not explain that the conference moves around general geographical areas, and 2006 is scheduled for the US West Coast. Many wanted a European or UK location.

Another group of comments praised local mini-conferences and urged UPA to hold more of them, rather than a single, large conference.

Other comments touted the value of specific favorite cities – often the place where they live.

- Consider Milwaukee as a venue. It has the Midwest Express conference center, an easy and manageable airport, a fabulous river walk with excellent restaurants and microbreweries, a world-renowned art museum, a sailing center on Lake Michigan, sailing excursions, brewery tours, sandy beaches, hiking trails along Lake Michigan, kayaking, canoeing, cycling. It's also the home of Harley Davidson Motorcycles. It is a truly beautiful city--a jewel on Lake Michigan--and extremely hospitable.
- I would like to see a conference in Pittsburgh, PA.
- Consider Austin or San Antonio TX some time in the future. Both are beautiful cities and well equipped for conferences.
- Chicago would be a great location!
- A conference in Europe, for example in Paris, France.
- try the Caribbean as a location. It would be very cost effective for people coming from the United States and I have excellent airline and hotel contacts. I would suggest Trinidad or Jamaica
- make the conference on the east coast, New York or maybe Boston....
- How about a conference in Calgary, Alberta, Canada? Calgary is one of the most high-tech cities in North America, and is second only to Toronto in the number of head offices in Canada. We have terrific weather (during the summer :) and is a great place to visit being so close to Banff, the mountain parks, etc. We have a world class convention centre in downtown Calgary, with plenty of top notch hotels to choose from.
- Canada would be a great choice (Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary are great locations).
- New Orleans