



## Attending a Paralegal Conference: An Insider's Perspective

[by Shalva Alexander]

Attend or not attend? This is the question that many legal professionals ask themselves about the numerous conferences and symposia they are invited to attend. A great number of them make decisions on the fly, based on the mood of the moment and a super-quick analysis of pros and cons. But what happens if after rejecting conferences by the dozen, you, in your moment of weakness, said yes, committing yourself and your company to plan, spend, travel, network, and, hopefully, reap the benefits of the above? Having just returned from a conference in Biloxi, MS, I'm ready to share my thoughts on the efficacy of spending several days away from the well-established routine of work and home.

Starting with the pros, I'm pretending that all the inconveniences of travel do not factor into my calculus: the suitcases, the security checks, the superhuman effort to catch some sleep on the plane. Dispensing with all that, I'm finally there - the Southern gambling town known for its hospitality, charm, and slot machines on the water. But before I indulge my taste for local shrimp, catfish, and a number closest to 21, there is a conference to attend. The 53rd Annual Education Conference and National Forum of the National Association of Legal Secretaries (NALS) is about to start, and the season of hobnobbing and networking is upon us. Paralegals, legal secretaries, and other legal staff members begin streaming by our booth, and the mood instantly changes. I realize that the business of these folks is business, and so from the comfortable tourist mode I switch to "sure, we can do that for you" mode. "Brand thy product" is the first commandment of marketing, and so off we go to the races. The attendees are enjoying moving from booth to booth, while I marvel at my own ability to package the same speech in 20 different renditions. As the traffic by our booth increases, so does the adrenaline rush and the desire for higher salaries. Soon, my pulse rate begins to resemble the tides of the nearby Gulf of Mexico: up and down, depending on how many legal staffers consider it worth their while to approach our booth. True, there was a lot of work to be done, but let's be honest, who would not want to listen to himself talk for three hours?

Another plus of going to a conference was the informal networking and story swapping

that are often both useful and entertaining. Removed from home surroundings, many attendees become each others' most trusted confidantes, ready to share with perfect strangers their life stories. From business ideas they would like to try out to jibes at their absent bosses, spouses, and co-workers--these all come out during the slow traffic periods. And if one is curious enough, in a Mark Twain sort of way, to listen to others' life imbroglios, conferences can serve as invaluable venues to satisfy one's thirst for obscure tales.

As far as the cons are concerned, there were very few of those, and these mainly pertained to one's inability to stop shoving quarters down into the insatiable belly of a machine and the realization that gambling expenses are not likely to be reimbursed by the company's accountant. On a more serious note, after my plane touched down at Los Angeles International Airport, I knew there and then that despite the fatigue of spending 20 hours traveling and the inconvenience of being separated from family and friends, I would always fondly remember the time spent writing a small chapter of my life in Biloxi, MS.