How to Write a Conference Proposal that Stands Out

Step 1: Familiarize yourself with the conference where you or your speaker(s) would like to present. Most conferences have the following components (if the conference has a website, this information should be found there):

- **Theme.** If the conference is annual, it probably has a theme to distinguish each new year of the conference from previous years. If the conference has a theme, note it and try to incorporate it into your proposal if possible. Proposals that address the theme in some way will stand out.
- **Conference coordinator.** All conferences have a coordinator that you can contact with any questions you may have during the proposal process. Jot down their name, email, and/or phone number before moving forward.
- **Speaker proposal.** This may be called a number of different names, including application, submission form, presentation proposal, etc., but they essentially refer to the same thing. The proposal may be an online form, meaning you must enter information into a series of boxes on the actual website and then hit a submit button after filling them out, or a downloadable form, in which you complete the form and then email it to the conference coordinator.
- **Proposal deadline.** Usually this will be listed on the proposal itself, but sometimes there will be listed elsewhere on the website or not at all, in which case you would need to contact the conference coordinator to find out. Either way, you must know the deadline.
- **Session length.** Each conference will either have a set length of time for breakout sessions, or it may have 1-3 different amounts of time that you can choose from. Conference sessions are typically between 50 or 90 minutes long, but make sure to check the speaker proposal for the session length before moving forward with drafting your proposal.
    - The session length will give you an idea of which speaker(s) and how many you will need for your session. If you do not have any speakers that can provide a lengthy presentation, you may consider one of the following options:
        - a panel presentation featuring 3-4 OMOD speakers
        - a workshop with a combination of personal stories and activities the audience can participate in
        - a showcase, or line-up, of self-advocate stories
    - Whichever format you choose for your session, you will want to allot at least 10-15 minutes at the end of your presentation for audience questions and evaluations, if you intend to collect feedback.

Step 2: Locate the speaker proposal. Download it if possible. If it is an online form, write down the questions or copy and paste them into a Word document. Speaker proposals nearly always ask for the following:

- **Title.** Typically 100 characters max. Think of a title that will hook your audience's attention. Consider using a short, catchy title followed by a longer, more straightforward title. Here are a few examples:
  - Wheel Magnolias: Empowered Women with Disabilities
  - Help! I Need Somebody: Getting the Help You Need at Home, Work, Travel, and Play
  - Transition with Ambition: Re-imagining Your Teen's Possibilities for Independence
- **Description.** Conferences frequently ask for both a short and a long description.
  - <u>Short description:</u> No more than 150 words. This is usually what will appear in the conference program, so direct this to the conference attendees and state why they should attend your session. Consider starting your description with a question, or something similar, to grab the reader's attention.
  - <u>Long description:</u> Usually between 350-500 words. This is where you explain in detail exactly how your session will be structured and what material you will cover.
- **Relevant speaker bio(s).** Usually 100-200 words max. You may have a lengthy well-written bio outlining all of your accomplishments, but if it does not pertain to the topic you are speaking about, it will not be as effective. Here is an example of a relevant speaker bio for a presentation on attendant care:
  - Eric Clow is the project coordinator of *Opening Minds, Opening Doors* as well as a writer, musician, and traveler. After graduating from UC Berkeley in 2011, he moved to Austin to pursue a career in music and media. He has used personal attendant care for 8 years and has developed creative strategies to getting additional help in school, work, out with friends, and on the road, successfully traveling through more than 10 countries and most of the United States. Through acquiring help in this wide range of settings, Eric has learned what works and what to avoid.

Step 3: Don't be intimidated by the proposal form. Here is a process we have found helpful for drafting speaker proposals in OMOD:

1. **Meditate** (or think quietly about the conference and the application in front of you.)
2. **Brainstorm** ideas. Think about who your audience is. Ask yourself how your topic can help those in your audience.
3. **Free write** a list of titles and draft of the session description(s). Conferences frequently ask for both short and long descriptions.

4. **Ask for constructive feedback.** Meet with your fellow staff members to review and/or modify your presentation idea and title. If you are submitting a proposal independently, send your rough draft to a friend or family member and see what they think.
5. **Rewrite** your title and description with this feedback.
6. **Final review.** Share your revised draft with your fellow staff members, friend, or others who provided you feedback, and see if the updated draft resolved all of the issues. If not, rewrite it again and repeat this process.

Step 4: Provide any additional information and/or materials requested in the speaker proposal. This may include:

- **Headshots of speaker(s).** Some conferences may ask for this in the speaker proposal. The more professional the photo, the better, but even if you do not have a budget for a professional photographer, you can still take a photo using your own camera or even your phone camera to fulfill this requirement.
- **Target audience.** Many proposals will have a list of different audience groups and then ask you to select which specific groups for which your session will be most useful. Here are a few examples of different audience groups you may find at a disability-focused conference:
    - People with disabilities
    - Parents and/or caregivers
    - Healthcare and/or disability professionals
    - Other
- **Take-aways.** Other speaker proposals may ask you in some form or other what your audience will "take away" or gain from attending your session. These are essentially the learning objectives for your audience.
    - When identifying your take-aways, remember to:
        - Be practical
        - Use active verbs
        - Consider the specific skills, knowledge, confidence, solutions, information, etc., your audience will gain from your session
    - *Example 1:* Workshop participants will take away the confidence to pursue creative hobbies, real creative solutions to obstacles people with disabilities encounter in the arts, and information on community resources and programs that help artists with disabilities succeed.
    - *Example 2:* Session participants will define an ideal recreational space, express themselves through creative writing, and recognize the needs of people with disabilities who visit parks.

- **A/V needs.** When applying to present at a conference, you will need to consider what kind of technology and other equipment may require. Some speaker proposals will specifically ask for this information; if they don't, you should contact the conference coordinator directly to ask what equipment will be available. Common A/V equipment required in OMOD presentations include the following:
    - Projector, screen, laptop, and computer speakers for showing PowerPoint presentations, slideshows, and/or videos
    - Lavalier, headset, or tabletop microphones for OMOD speakers with limited mobility
- **Spatial needs.** Though less common than the other additional items listed above, some conference speaker proposals may also ask how you will need the room to be set up for your presentation. If you are utilizing either the panel or showcase formats, you will probably succeed in the standard room set up and may only want to clarify your presenters' accessibility needs (i.e., accessible pathway to the front of the room, ramp onto the stage, etc.). If you plan to use interactive activities with the audience members, you may require further adjustments that you will need to request either on the speaker proposal or from the conference coordinator directly.

Step 5: Once you have completed your speaker proposal, submit it to the conference coordinator or via the online submission page, if the proposal is embedded on the conference website. Retain your proposal submission receipt or email confirmation, until you receive your official acceptance or rejection from the conference. If you do not receive any confirmation, you may want to contact the conference coordinator to confirm that they did receive your proposal.