Is professional development worth it?

In communications-related professions (PR, advertising, marketing, etc.), we aren't really required or obligated to complete Continuing Education Units (CEUs) to stay up to date or licensed in our fields. That's too bad because things change all the time and you must keep up if you want to stay relevant and informed.

So yes, I think professional development is a must. Since we don't have a defined, structured program like CPAs or social workers trying to maintain licenses and accreditation, how and where do we get our professional development? And how much do we need to pay for it?

There is no one communications industry conference we must attend, but yet there are dozens of communications-related conferences around the country, such as Content Marketing World and PRSA International Conference and others. Some of them are really expensive, as in nearly $2,000, not including airfare and hotel. Is professional development worth that?

Of course, there are dozens of local lower-cost options, such as lunch and learns, offered to members and nonmembers by the various comms/marketing organizations (IABC, PRSA, AMA, etc.). Webinars are also becoming very popular. And then there are some free options, including various Meetups. But is low cost or even free professional development worthwhile?

My answer is that it depends. An expensive conference may be worth the cost if you learn a lot and make good networking connections. A free meetup may not be worth it if you don't even pick up a useful bit of information. **It's not about cost, it is about value.**

The trouble is that it can be pretty hard to determine the

value.

I have attended several lower cost professional development events that have been extremely worthwhile, and then I have gone to some that have been a complete waste of money, time and effort. It' all depends on the quality and background of the presenters and the moderators, and also of the organization. Is the room suited for the presentation? Will you be able to hear and see OK?

Last night I attended a free nonprofit/tech happy hour at a bar (in a private area) with a speaker, who spoke for about ten minutes. I didn't learn anything new. But then again, he didn't have a formal presentation (no PowerPoint) and he was at a very informal setting. Contrast that with a free MeetUp that I attended a couple of weeks ago, in a more formal setting, where the speaker spoke for 45 minutes or longer and had a presentation deck to refer to. I came away from that one with lots of food for thought. Both opportunities were free, both about related subjects, but one had much more value than the other.

One of my favorite, and very inexpensive, professional development opportunities is WordCamp (a volunteer-run, volunteer-led presentation on all things WordPress). I have been to three already, and am planning to attend WordCamp Philly in a couple of weeks. For the $20-$30 price of attendance, I have picked up quite a lot of useful information.

The bottom line is that as a communicator, you must budget time and money for professional development. You'll have to research and attend several types of events to find the ones that offer the most value. Staying current is crucial in communications.