CHAPTER

23 Pre-Conference Preparation

Timing

Allocate ample time in your pre-conference schedule for site preparation. If you don't, you're likely to find yourself rushing around trying to get everything ready at the last minute. I much prefer to arrive on-site early, finish site preparation, and have a few hours to relax before registration starts, than arrive at the conference site half a day later and be running about trying to borrow a digital camera that works or installing signs in the rain as the first attendees drive up.

In general, the shorter the conference the harder it is to prepare the site. If you've paid to use a facility for a single day, you may need to pay extra for access the previous afternoon or evening so you can set up. It may even be impossible to get access the day before, because the space is booked by another event. Under these circumstances, a morning start may require your steering committee to rise at an early hour and participate in a somewhat frantic, but hopefully disciplined, rush to get everything ready on time. If you're running a short conference, meticulously plan how you'll accomplish your site preparation in the time available.

If I'm running a multiday conference I like to arrive on-site, together with a few steering committee members, about 24 hours before the conference starts. This gives us plenty of time to complete the site preparation described in the following sections, and allows for a leisurely steering committee dinner or lunch before the conference starts.

Preparing conference signage

There are two kinds of signs you'll need for your conference site, *navigational* and *informational*. Make sure signs are easily readable and that outdoor signs will withstand wind and rain.

When creating *navigational* conference signs, put yourself in the position of an attendee who has never visited the conference site. Start with the directions to the conference site you distributed to registrants. As they drive through the school gates, turn into the churchyard, or pull up to the hotel entrance, where should you place signs and directional arrows so attendees know they've arrived at the conference site and can see where to go next? Once they've parked their cars in the correct parking lot, are there signs pointing to the conference registration location? From registration, they'll need directions and appropriate signage so they can find their rooms and make their way to the conference welcome and roundtable. Finally, attendees will need signs that direct them, in either direction, between any two conference session locations.

Some *informational* signs remain fixed throughout the conference, like signs showing the name of a session location ("Vendor Exhibit Area," "Dining Hall," "Peer Session Room A"). Others, like the schedule and location of peer sessions being run on a given day, should be posted in a timely fashion once their content is determined. Planning in advance where and when signs need to be posted, with a steering committee member responsible for carrying out the plan, will greatly reduce attendee confusion, questions, and annoyance.

Setting up on-site registration

First impressions

On-site registration can be a hectic time. You have no control over when attendees show up, and invariably there will be times when there are people waiting in line to register. A one-day conference, when most people show up at the last minute, is particularly challenging.

On-site registration involves many tasks:

- Welcoming attendees as they arrive
- Providing refreshments
- Verifying attendee registration information
- Handing out the conference folder and name badges
- Registering "at the door" attendees
- Collecting unpaid registration fees

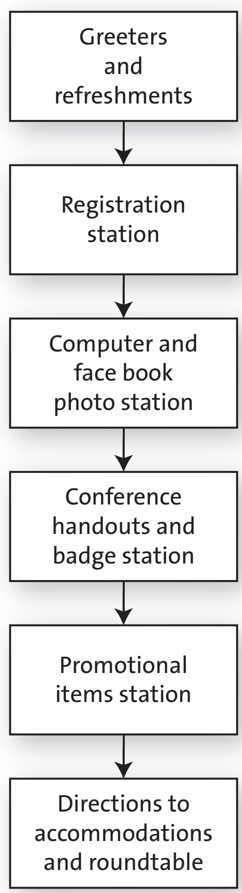
- Taking attendee photographs for face book
- Distributing swag
- Providing directions to on-site accommodations
- Answering attendee questions

Once on-site, an attendee's first experience is invariably the conference registration process. Following the suggestions in this section will help you provide a welcoming and pleasant registration experience to incoming attendees, and will minimize your stress and mistakes.

Physical setup

During your site visit you decided on a suitable place to hold on-site registration. Now it's time for setup. First think about the traffic pattern for the registration area. You want a layout that promotes a smooth flow for incoming attendees, as shown in Figure 23.1.

FIGURE 23.1 • On-site Registration Flow



Make sure there's room for a few steering committee members to meet and greet incoming attendees—this is very important. There should also be a place for attendees to relax while waiting to register. Set up some seating there and arrange a refreshment table nearby.

If you're holding a one-day, wintertime conference in a single building, provide a place for people to hang their coats.

Provided you have scheduled enough time for on-site registration (see Table 16.1), you'll only need one registration station. A registration station includes:

- Computer loaded with the registration database and any necessary camera picture transfer software;
- Attached local printer, for printing registration reports;
- Attached digital camera, for taking face book photographs;
- Blank, light-colored wall or other vertical background suitable for posing face book headshots; and
- One or more staffers with the necessary skills and training to run registration.

In addition, you'll need access to a laser printer to print copies of your face book. *A copying machine will not produce acceptable reproductions of attendee photographs and an ink jet printer will be too slow.*

The conference face book

In my view, a conference face book is an essential peer conference tool. Few people have a photographic memory that can infallibly associate faces with names or organizations, especially when meeting a large number of people in a short period of time. The face book provides an invaluable reference to conference participants, both during the conference and afterwards. I can't tell you how many times I have referred to a conference face book to find the name of the person who was so knowledgeable about a subject during an earlier session, or, six months later, to retrieve contact information for an attendee to whom I needed to talk again.

A conference face book contains a photo of each attendee, plus associated relevant information. At a minimum, this should include each participant's name, organization, address, phone, and email. Other items appropriate to the theme of the conference can be added, but only include information that is likely to be of interest to a significant number of attendees. Figure 23.2 shows a sample face book entry.

Because the face book is so useful, it should be completed, printed, and distributed at the conference as quickly as possible. This requires careful organization. I suggest you have at least

FIGURE 23.2 • Sample Face Book Entry

Name:	**Adrian Segar**				
School:					
Title:	**Conference Facilitator**				
Address:				School type:	
				Number Students:	
Email, phone:	adrian@segar.com;				
School computers:		Faculty/teaching:		IT Staff/faculty:	
Student computers:		Faculty/non-teaching:		IT Staff/non-faculty:	
		Staff/non-faculty:			
Questions:					
Expertise:	not taking myself too seriously				
User environment:					
Network OS:					
Network Topology:					
Client OS:					
Admin S/W:					
Academic tech:					
Twitter:					
Linkedin:					
Facebook:					
Other:					

one person, preferably two people, whose sole job during the conference is to complete, print, and distribute the face book.

Capture face book information from pre-conference registration. There's enough going on at on-site registration without the additional work of entering information. If you do this, you'll only need to take participants' photos at registration time. I say only, but getting an acceptable photo of every participant requires careful preparation and a certain amount of persistent follow-up to capture photos of the one or two attendees who have yet to face the camera.

It's important to plan the printing of your face book before the conference, because most copying machines will not create a decent copy of a laser-printed photograph. Such copies are usually very unflattering and seriously detract from the value of the face book. I once made the mistake of relying on the conference hotel to make copies of the face book. The resulting reproduction was so poor, it would have been better to skip the photos entirely. Do a test run of any copier that you plan to use. If a high-resolution copier isn't available, you will need to print the entire face book on a laser printer. Printing at an off-site print shop might be an option, but it hasn't worked for me because of the need to get printed face books into attendees' hands as quickly as possible.

If you print the face book on a laser printer, make sure that you print the book *uncollated* (i.e., with the software set to print multiple copies of each page before starting the next). This is usually a checkbox option “Collate” in the print dialog that appears right before printing; make sure the box is unchecked. If you print a collated face book, your printer will have to download new photographs for each page printed, and your printing speed will slow to a crawl. I’ve made this mistake too!

Include a footnote on each page stating that the information contained is confidential and may only be distributed to conference attendees.

If a significant number of your attendees have laptops with them, you can offer them a PDF file of the face book to store on their computer. To avoid creating a very large file, make sure that the digital photos used aren’t too large. JPEG images that are 50–100KB in size work well and the resulting PDF file will be a few MB. The PDF file can be made available on the conference wiki or shared storage space. Paper copies can be printed only for those attendees who request one. A PDF file can display attendee photos in color, something that may not otherwise be possible unless you have a color laser printer to make your printed copies.

Create at least two versions of the face book. A paper copy of the first draft must be given to attendees before the start of the roundtable session, so they can make notes about what they hear directly onto the relevant person’s face book page. If printing the copies with photographs will take too long, omit photographs from the first draft. To be sure that you’ll get copies of the first draft printed in time, testing face book printing and copying times in advance is essential.

At a one-day conference, immediately after the roundtable post a paper copy, including photos, of the first draft of the face book in a central spot. Pin up every sheet separately, with attendees sorted in alphabetical order. Ask attendees to check their face book information by 30 minutes before lunch ends, and legibly make any corrections or additions or write a check mark if it’s complete. Announce when missing photos will be taken. Before lunch ends, chase down those who haven’t signed off on their face book information or been photographed.

At a longer conference, use a similar procedure, adding the printing and display of a second draft of the face book and asking attendees for a final review to catch errors and omissions.

As soon as the face book is finalized, print and distribute copies as necessary to attendees. Create a PDF of the finalized face book and post it on the conference wiki and/or shared network space.

Once you have paper copies of the face book available, don’t leave them in a pile in a public space. Make every effort to limit distribution of face books to conference attendees. If you are holding a vendor exhibit, take special care to keep face books out of vendors’ hands.

Preparing the vendor exhibit area

Preparing the vendor exhibit area involves obtaining and setting up any and all of the following items: tables, drapes, chairs, power, and Internet access, as per the floor plan you've already prepared. If at all possible, it's best to do this the day before the conference starts, though the morning of a conference that starts after lunch may offer enough time.

Transporting furniture and setting it up in the right place is an exhausting job that seems to take forever if the vendor coordinator tries to do it all himself, and relatively easy if he has a few people to help. Don't be a martyr; make sure that you get the help you need for this task.

If you need to run power or wired Internet connections to vendor tabletops or booths, install extension cords and cables in zero- or low-traffic areas and use gaffer tape to secure them to the floor.

Post navigational signs to guide attendees between the vendor exhibit area and the rooms where vendor presentations will be held. Also post copies of the vendor presentation schedule around the exhibit area and on the doors of the presentation rooms.

Initial conference seating

At the conference welcome and introduction, two or three people speak, one at a time, to the audience. This is a standard scenario for using a classroom-seating format, and with 60 or more attendees that's how you should set up your opening session.

If you have fewer than 60 attendees, and will be running a single roundtable session, start your conference with people seated in the roundtable circle. This avoids having attendees move around after the opening session, breaking the conference flow, and emphasizes that the roundtable is the key session at the start of the conference.

Roundtable setup

The roundtable setup you use depends on the number of attendees at your peer conference. At most peer conferences a single roundtable is all you need. But if you have more than 60 attendees you should run two simultaneous roundtables. If your pre-conference registration count is around 60, prepare for both possibilities, since at-the-door registrations may increase your roundtable attendance, while no-shows and/or late arrivals may reduce it.

If for some reason you cannot hold your roundtable in a room that is large enough for a circle of chairs for the roundtable, the next best alternative is a single block of square or rectangular tables around which everyone sits. Everyone can easily see at least the people on the other three sides with this arrangement, and it has the advantage of giving each attendee a writing surface for making face book notes. In my experience, this arrangement creates a more informal roundtable atmosphere, which can be successful with a small group, particularly if most people already know each other.

You'll need:

For every attendee:
- A chair
- A 5 × 8 card listing the three roundtable questions (see Appendix 6)
- A draft copy of the conference face book (produced right before the conference starts)

For each roundtable session:
- Two flip chart stands and pads. Masking tape, if the flip chart sheets aren't the kind with a self-adhesive strip OR a plentiful amount of wall-mounted whiteboard space
- Two roundtable scribes and a timekeeper
- A place to hang completed flip chart sheets
- Two boxes of pens
- A timing device (see below)
- A digital camera (optional but recommended)

Roundtable layout

When I started running conferences I paid little attention to the configuration of the rooms in which we met. Eventually I noticed that seating arrangements had a subtle yet profound influence on the intimacy and effectiveness of group sessions. For traditional sessions with a speaker or panel, classroom seating was fine.

But for peer conference sessions, where everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute, I realized how important it was that everyone could see everyone else's face, and that individuals weren't emphasized or de-emphasized by virtue of where they sat. Multiple rows, wavering lines of chairs, or chairs scrunched into a too-small room all significantly reduced the intimacy and power of peer sessions. For the roundtable, I discovered that a circle of chairs worked best.

To prepare for a roundtable session, set out a circle of chairs, with a few gaps so people can arrive and depart. If the space in which you're holding the roundtable is much larger than the circle of chairs, position one point of the circle near a wall where flip chart sheets can be hung.

FIGURE 23.3 • Classroom Seating

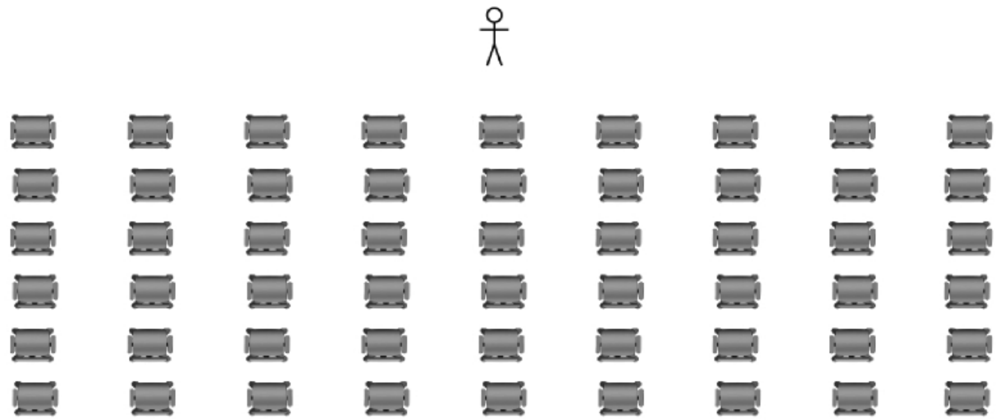
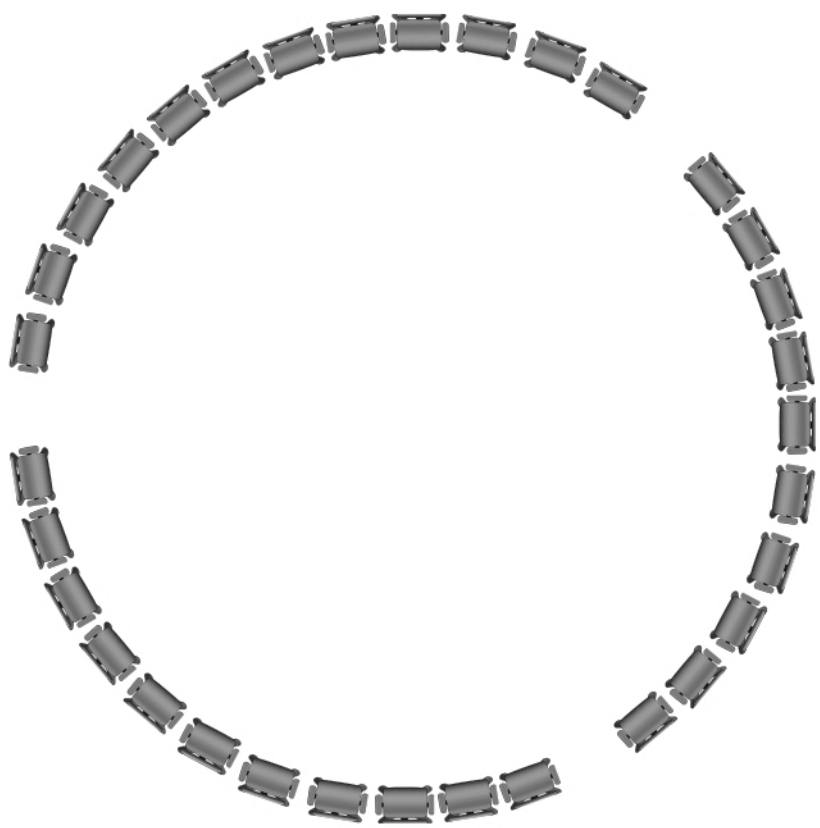


FIGURE 23.4 • Roundtable Seating



Set out one chair for each registrant, and *make the resulting circle as tight as possible*. Take time to make the circle as round as possible.

You want the smallest comfortable circle, with as few empty chairs as possible. I like to leave gaps in the circle and put out slightly too few chairs, with a pile of extras nearby. Then, latecomers can take a chair from the pile and put it in one of the gaps. This way, the circle is complete during the session, with no empty chairs at any time.

Unless you have a large expanse of nearby wall-mounted whiteboard available, place two flip chart stands near each other, just outside the circle. The flip charts should be near a wall where completed chart sheets can be hung.

Print enough roundtable questions cards to give one to each attendee. Give the cards and the pens to the roundtable scribes, for distribution at the end of the Four Freedoms introduction. If you're using masking tape to hang the flip chart sheets, tear off short strips and store them on the flip chart stands.

Use a digital camera to photograph the flip chart or whiteboard topics recorded during the session. The digital photographs, or a PDF containing them, can be posted on the conference wiki or on the conference file server, easily available for reference during the conference.

Capturing topics and themes

At each roundtable session you'll need two scribes who stand at the flip charts or whiteboards and alternatively record shared conference topics and ideas. Choose people who have some conference subject expertise so they can summarize attendee responses accurately and concisely.

Provide each attendee with a draft copy of the conference face book at the start of the roundtable session. Attendees can use their copy to make notes as the roundtable progresses.

Timekeeping

It's important to share the time allocated to a roundtable session equitably between attendees. This is the timekeeper's job. She does this by sounding up to two alerts; the first, 30 seconds before each attendee's allocated time expires, the second when the time is up.

Table 23.1 shows the duration of the roundtable session (minutes) and Table 23.2 shows the amount of time (minutes and seconds) available for each attendee's sharing. So, for example, at a one-day conference with 40 attendees you would sound an alert for each attendee after 60 and 90 seconds.

TABLE 23.1 • **Total Roundtable Session Time (minutes)**

		NUMBER OF ATTENDEES							
		30	**40**	**50**	**60**	**70**	**80**	**90**	**100**
CONFERENCE DURATION	1 day	60	75	90					
	1½–2 days	75	95	115	135	115	125	135	145
	> 2 days	90	115	140	150	132.5	145	150	150
		←1 roundtable→				←2 roundtables→			

TABLE 23.2 • **Roundtable Time Allocated to Each Attendee (minutes and seconds)**

		NUMBER OF ATTENDEES							
		30	**40**	**50**	**60**	**70**	**80**	**90**	**100**
CONFERENCE DURATION	1 day	1:30	1:30	1:30					
	1½–2 days	2:00	2:00	2:00	2:00	2:00	2:00	2:00	2:00
	> 2 days	2:30	2:30	2:30	2:15	2:30	2:30	2:20	2:00
		←1 roundtable→				←2 roundtables→			

When I decided to use timekeeping for roundtables it seemed, at first glance, to be a simple affair—something that any attendee given a watch or an inexpensive digital timer could easily do. Unfortunately, I quickly found out that attendees using such equipment found it very difficult to do the job well while simultaneously maintaining close attention to what the attendees in the roundtable were saying. Eventually I came up with three strategies that enable an attendee to be the timekeeper and still concentrate on the roundtable proceedings: (1) a small high-end digital timer that is convenient to use, though limited in minor ways; (2) Macintosh computer-based timing software that provides straightforward and flexible roundtable timekeeping; and (3) prerecorded alert tracks played on a digital music player.

The ideal timer for our purposes has the following characteristics:

- Provides the two roundtable time warnings needed in a single unit;
- Can be quickly set up to signal the passing of any desired time periods;
- Automatically resets to the original countdown times after it has counted down to zero;

How to use FlexTime for roundtable timekeeping

FlexTime, version 1.2.2 at time of writing, is available for download from Red Sweater Software (www.red-sweater.com/flextime/), requires Macintosh OSX 10.4 or above, and works on both PowerPC and Intel Macintoshes. You can try out FlexTime free for 30 days, after which you will need to register the program, at a cost of $18.95 (in 2009), for it to continue to run.

Because FlexTime can play any Macintosh alert sound, you can use any sounds you like for your roundtable alerts, as long as they are in AIFF format and installed correctly. The Apple article available at *http://docs.info.apple.com/article.html?artnum=106409* describes how to convert a sound to the AIFF format using iTunes, and explains how to add the sound as an alert to OS X. There are many sources of suitable sounds available on the Internet. You can obtain chimes and other sounds from *http://freesound.iua.upf.edu* (registration is required).

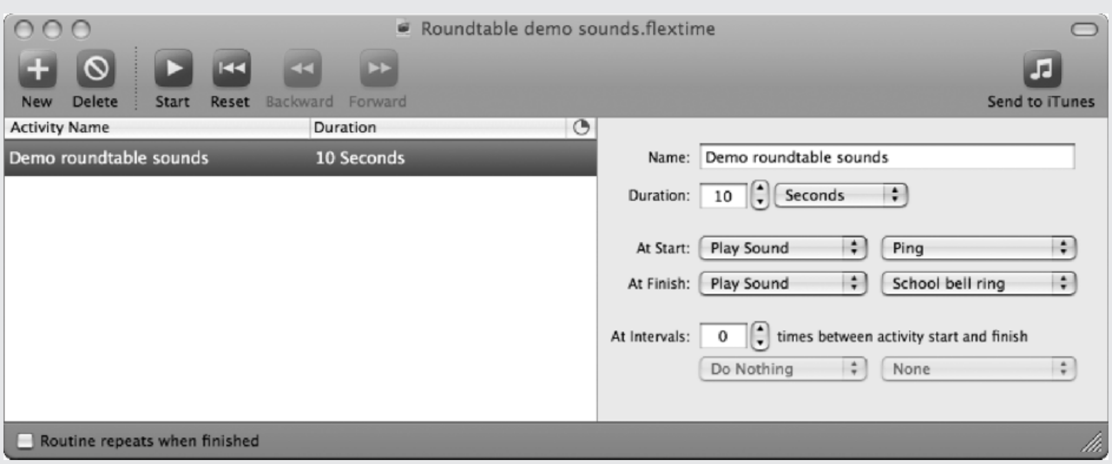
Use a different sound for the warning sound and the "time's up" sound, so attendees can know whether they need to wind up their answers, or stop.

I use FlexTime with two scripts, one that I use to demonstrate the sounds when introducing the roundtable, and one to play the sounds at the right times for each attendee. It's easy to create two alerts by adding a second timer after the first.

The first script, *Demo sounds*, plays the warning sound when started, waits ten seconds and plays the "time's up" sound.

To use the second script, *Roundtable timer*, the first timer is set to the time required before the 30-second warning. When started, the timer waits for this time before sounding the warning sound, and then plays the "time's up" sound 30 seconds later.

FIGURE 23.5 • FlexTime *Demo Sounds*



The scripts are available from www.conferencesthatwork.com, or can be quickly constructed by viewing the three screenshots in Figures 23.5–23.7.

You can export the audio from these two scripts to iTunes and then transfer the audio to an iPod or other music player. If you create a set of *Roundtable timer* audio tracks, each using a different attendee speaking time, you can use an iPod and small portable speakers to provide timed chimes for your roundtable. A set of these audio recordings is also available on www.conferencesthatwork.com.

FIGURE 23.6 • FlexTime *Roundtable Timer* Window 1

FIGURE 23.7 • FlexTime *Roundtable Timer* Window 2

- Easily resets to the original countdown times at any point;
- Makes no noise when being set or reset for the next attendee;
- Provides pleasant and appropriate warning sounds that can be changed in nature and volume as desired; and
- Is easy to use, so that it doesn't distract the timekeeper from the roundtable sharing.

The high-end digital timer and the computer-based timer I currently use satisfy these criteria. Because you may not have access to either of these, I'll also outline the older approaches that use a watch or two digital timers, and describe a method of roundtable timing using prerecorded chimes on a digital music player.

A watch with a seconds hand plus manually made warning and "time's up" sounds. This is the simplest method, but requires the most attention, and so should be given to a conference staff member who doesn't have a direct interest in the conference topic. As an attendee starts to talk, the timekeeper notes the position of the second hand and figures out when the two alerts should be given. Because the timekeeper must keep looking at her watch, it's hard for her to concentrate on what attendees are saying.

You can use small Tibetan hand cymbals or a struck chime to make the alert sounds. I prefer a chime, since it can be sounded with one hand, while the cymbals need two. If you don't have anything available to make a sound, an extrovert timekeeper can usually be found to say "beep" or something similar.

Two inexpensive digital timers. You can use two inexpensive digital timers to provide audible alerts. Both must have the capability to count down in minutes and seconds (some timers can only count down minutes). Timer A is set to count down the time until the first attendee warning. Timer B can either be started at the same time as Timer A and count down the full attendee time, or it can be set to 30 seconds and started when Timer A sounds. I prefer the second approach, with only one timer running at any moment.

Managing two digital timers is less distracting than using a watch, since once a timekeeper sees that a timer is counting down she doesn't have to keep checking to see whether an attendee's time is up. Unfortunately, most digital timers beep annoyingly while being reset and do not reset themselves to the original countdown time if they are stopped before the time period has expired. This can lead to a lot of distracting beeping whenever an attendee does not use his full time.

A multiple event digital timer. There are a number of digital timers that provide timing of multiple events in a single unit. Most are not well suited to timing a roundtable. Common problems include: having to press multiple buttons to start and reset two event timers, a small display, buttons that become unreliable after a short time, and timers that start to count up after time is up. One unit that can provide the timing flexibility needed is the *Invisible Clock II* from the *Time Now Corporation*. This small unit, which costs about $40, has a countdown timer mode that includes alerts that can be set to go off at any time during the countdown. Its display is tiny, the unit is very complicated to set up, and it has a limited number of alert sounds that it can produce, but it does provide all the timing functionality needed in a compact package.

A computer-based timer. If you have access to a computer, preferably a laptop, you can use it to run timing software that provides all the ideal functionality I listed above. There are plenty of timer programs available for computers running the Macintosh and Windows operating systems, but few provide exactly what we need for roundtable timekeeping. An exception is the Macintosh program *FlexTime* from *Red Sweater Software*. FlexTime, which costs $18.95 and can be evaluated for free for 30 days, allows you to quickly create a custom sequence of a 30-second warning sound and a "time's up" sound. You can use any sound sources you want for the sounds. See the FlexTime sidebar for more details on how to use this program.

I'm not aware of a comparable program for Windows computers. Please contact me if you find one (or write one)!

Digital music player and pre-built audio timing recordings. I have used the FlexTime timer to create a series of audio tracks, available on www.conferencesthatwork.com, that can be played on an iPod or other digital music player through some small portable speakers. This is a convenient way to provide correctly timed alerts for your roundtable. If you are using an iPod, once you have chosen the correct timing track, I suggest you place it in an On-The-Go playlist by itself (highlight the track and press and hold the Select button until the title flashes) so you don't play other neighboring tracks by mistake during the roundtable.

Preparing for two simultaneous roundtables

If you have more than 60 attendees, it's best to hold two simultaneous roundtable sessions. Although this means that each attendee will be able to hear directly from just half of the attendees, the alternative is either a marathon session lasting three hours or more, or unacceptably abbreviated sharing time for each attendee. Short pre- and post-roundtable pair sessions, as outlined here and described in detail in Chapter 25, allow attendees to gain most of the benefits of a single roundtable without being overwhelmed with information.

The ideal setup for running two simultaneous roundtable sessions is to have three rooms, one with classroom seating for the whole group, and two each containing a circle of chairs for half the group. If you don't have this much space available, two rooms will suffice but you'll need to move chairs about in the initial room, changing the seating arrangement from classroom to circle. Don't hold both roundtables in the same space, no matter how large; it's too distracting.

At the end of the conference welcome and introduction, attendees will still be arranged in classroom seating. Use the following outline to prepare for the seating and room changes that will be needed.

- Once attendees have written their answers to the three questions, explain the process for two simultaneous roundtables.
- Pair up people from the same organization and remove them from the classroom seating. Have each pair decide who will be in Group One and Two.
- Split the remaining group into pairs by counting off "A-B." If you have movable seating, the pairs can spread out around the room.
- Have pair members share with their buddy their answers to the three roundtable questions (6 minutes).
- Have the two roundtable groups, A and B, move to separate rooms with circle seating.
- Hold separate roundtables, during which each attendee adds a very brief summary of their pair buddy's answers to questions 2 and 3.
- Return to the initial room and have the pairs get together again.
- Have each pair member summarize for their buddy their roundtable's responses, especially those relevant to their buddy's interests and experience, and share any topics of special interest (8 minutes).

After the roundtable session

The roundtable is usually the longest conference session. When it's over, attendees need a break! If you're holding a morning roundtable, make sure that refreshments are available immediately following the roundtable. Follow an afternoon roundtable with a break and a social with appropriate refreshments.

Preparing for peer session sign-up

The timing and location of peer session sign-up are linked. If sign-up is scheduled during a conference activity, such as lunch, dinner, or an evening social break, the topic sign-up sheets must be posted near the physical location of the session, preferably in the same room or space.

If you're planning to hold peer session sign-up during an outdoor social, you can use free-standing notice boards placed close to where people are gathered. Be prepared to switch to an appropriate indoor location if the weather doesn't cooperate.

Keeping a conference logbook

Maintaining a simple logbook during your conference creates a valuable resource if attendees decide to repeat the conference or you plan to organize more conferences in the future. The logbook needn't be elaborate; a simple ruled notebook will work just fine. For each conference, paste in the conference schedule, and note session timings, protocols and procedures used, problems, ideas for improvements, and what worked, what didn't, and why. Somehow, my memories of such things fade faster than I anticipate, and my conference logbook provides me a way to capture fleeting, and often, in retrospect, important learnings for later review.

Decide how you're going to display the 8.5 × 11 topic sheets. They can be:

- thumbtacked to wall-mounted or freestanding notice boards
- taped to smooth walls
- laid on tables

You'll need *at least* five horizontal inches of notice board or ten inches of tabletop width for each attendee. This provides space for one topic sheet for each attendee, which is usually enough. I prefer to play it safe and put out two sheets for each attendee.

Sign-up tables and notice boards should have at least 10 feet of open space in front of them to allow attendees to mingle and see topics easily. With notice boards, pin up two rows of topic sheets with the dividing line between them about five feet from the ground so they're easily accessible. For tables, remove any surrounding chairs and lay out a single row of sheets around the accessible perimeter of the tables.

Put out plenty of pens, at least one for every two attendees. When using notice boards, hanging the pens from strings keeps them conveniently at hand during sign-up.

Preparing for peer sessions

During the site visit you chose four rooms for holding peer sessions. I've never needed more than four, but, if for some reason you do, you can always use the main roundtable/spective space for an additional group. Setting up these spaces for peer sessions is a matter of making sure that there's adequate seating and a blackboard/whiteboard/flip chart with appropriate working markers. If some of your peer sessions might benefit from computer, overhead, or video projection, set up and test any such equipment that you've arranged to have available.

Set up the initial peer session room seating to encourage discussion. Use chairs set in a circle or rounded square, or around one or more tables in the middle of the room. If a peer session is a presentation or panel, attendees can always rearrange their chairs to support this format.

Also figure out where you'll post peer session schedules once they've been established. Posting locations should include the door of each peer session room, plus refreshment and other gathering areas where attendees may want to know which session is being held in which room.

Steering committee pre-conference meal

The steering committee pre-conference meal—dinner the night before for a morning-start conference, or lunch on the day of an afternoon-start conference—is a time for steering committee members to enjoy good food, drink, and conversation while making any last-minute arrangements and decisions. Take everyone out to the nicest place your budget can afford. This pre-conference time is one of the few perks you can offer steering committee members. Providing a fine meal in pleasant surroundings and good company is small compensation for all the preparatory work and tasks your committee will perform during the conference.

The conference coordinator should create an informal agenda. During the meal:

- Confirm that everyone understands their conference jobs, and that all jobs have people assigned. In particular, determine who will greet incoming attendees at on-site registration.
- Decide whether you'll use a volunteer to start your roundtable session(s), to provide a good model for attendees to follow.
- Make any last-minute practical arrangements.
- Ask and answer any outstanding questions.
- Remind committee members who are facilitating and convening sessions of the importance of starting and keeping the conference on schedule.
- Relax and have fun!