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Attending NeoCon® to Enhance the Knowledge Base of You and Your Client by Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA

Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA, writes a regular column for Contract on business practices in design and professional development. This month, he offers advice on why NeoCon® is valuable for designers and their clients to attend in person.

As I look forward to attending NeoCon® this June, as I have done more than 20 times in the past, I always enjoy my friends' reactions when I tell them I am going. They offer up some of the same comments and questions each year, including, "I never thought of you as a neoconservative," and, "Will there really be enough new task chairs to justify the four-hour flight from San Francisco?"

Well, I'm not a neoconservative. And maybe I don't need to see all the new chairs, tables, desks, and fabrics, but there are tens of thousands of designers, architects, facility managers, real estate directors, and manufacturers who do each year. NeoCon® is that unique annual commingling of all aspects and components of our profession, and it continues to build the industry. I have the opportunity to learn from talks by leaders of the profession who are sharing their expertise and wisdom. (Speaking of which, this year I will be presenting the workshop "Getting Work by Writing Amazing Proposals.") I visit all the NeoCon® floors in the Merchandise Mart, as well as the showrooms that are in buildings nearby, attend IIDA's Annual Meeting, and see colleagues from all over the world.

More to the point, we designers gain a much better understanding of the current and future design solutions offered by the manufacturers when we go to NeoCon® in person. Of course, all of the products can be viewed on websites, but that's not the most effective way for designers to get information. We need the visceral experience of touching and seeing from all dimensions; you'll even see designers crawling on showroom floors to see a product's underbelly. No other venue offers the chance for both designers and their clients to view all of the interior furnishing options being considered for a project, meet with product representatives and manufacturer executives, sit in the workstations and open the drawers, and have hors d'oeuvres or a glass of wine appear as if by magic.

Some claim that it's too busy during NeoCon® for clients to appreciate the many products shown, but experiencing them in a setting full of people is closer to a working environment than an empty showroom is. Clients see people in chairs, making calls in a workstation,

meeting in conference rooms, and walking on carpet. They also learn much more about our business of design and get a greater understanding of the value that designers bring to client organizations.

After all these years attending NeoCon®, I still look forward to being in the showrooms and listening to presentations given to designers and their clients, enjoying the reactions to new fabrics and textures, seeing new glass and other materials, feeling new carpet details, and talking with representatives and executives about product line successes and failures. Although I know many of the manufacturers' product designers, I remain fascinated watching younger designers (and, actually, everyone is younger than me) interact with these demigods of design. Those younger designers will take a picture, walk away glowing, think, "Wow, I just talked with _____," tell all their friends about it, and remember the encounter when considering specifying the product in the future.

Now, it can be difficult for a young practitioner to get the O.K. from his or her firm to attend NeoCon®, but it's worth the effort to push. For my first trip, I submitted a written justification along the lines of the third paragraph in this column. I committed to collecting product information, told my manager that I would make a presentation to colleagues when I returned, and included all the cost information on the least expensive travel and lodging options. This approach to making the business case for the trip not only prompted the firm's management to approve the expense but also gave them a sense that I was interested in growing at the company. If you're not successful the first time you ask, your managers will expect the request next year. By the way, if you return home with some swag—a plastic drawing tube, teddy bear, or carry bag—it's a badge of honor for getting into an elevator at the Mart!

It is not about the swag, though. It's about all of the above. NeoCon® is about building our community and knowledge base—and I look forward to seeing you there!

Richard Pollack is the CEO of San Francisco-based Pollack Consulting, which supports firm growth and success through improved business development, winning presentation techniques, recruitment of top talent, business coaching, and ownership transition implementation.