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Who's Going to DevCon?

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One of the big questions on the various online forums since the beginning of the year has regarded the emergence of a second “DevCon” this year. For those of you who missed the announcement, the 11th VFP DevCon was announced at last year’s DevCon in Palm Desert – Advisor and Microsoft will be hosting the 2000 conference on September 24-28 in Miami. Since then, a second “VFP DevCon” sponsored by Microsoft and the folks who handled registration at the last few VFP DevCons has been announced for the middle of May in New Orleans.

They’re both calling themselves “DevCon”, both cost about \$1000, both are held at lush resorts or exotic locations (Hey, I’m from Milwaukee – I think Indianapolis is exotic!), both promise to be “the best DevCon ever”, and so on and so forth. (Note to self: Stop making jokes about lawyers. Start making jokes about marketers.)

It’s expensive enough to go to *one* of these events. \$1000 for the conference registration. Another \$1000 for hotel rooms, since it seems these resorts are always \$220 per night. Another \$500 to \$1000 for travel, depending on where you live and whether you want to rent a car. And while your feedbag is generally paid for, you probably will have to pony up for your own bar bill, which, in the case of some of you generous folks who can’t seem to simply buy a beverage for themselves, could be substantial as well.

How you gonna pay for TWO of these? Answer: You’re not. You’re going to have to choose. So how are you going to choose?

Easy enough to answer – determine why you are going, and then determine which show will provide what it is you’re looking for.

The Content

The first thing most people look for is content. New Orleans, being held in May, is going to be a VFP 6.0 show. That means that the topics presented are going to be old news to many of you, and there simply won’t be anything new to learn. On the other hand, if you’re just now coming up to speed on VFP 6 (and some of you are, having been waylaid by Y2K and are just now moving from Fox 2.x to Visual), the speakers are comfortable and knowledgeable – and so those sessions will go like clockwork.

There’s a sister show in New Orleans covering SQL Server, and there’s some sort of deal where VFP conference attendees can attend SQL Server sessions as well. Some of you are heading into SQL Server this year, and being able to cherry pick both VFP and SQL Server sessions at the same time sounds like a bargain to me.

Miami, on the other hand, will be featuring Visual FoxPro 7.0. I personally have never gone to a show to learn in-depth concepts and techniques – 75 minutes is simply not enough time to cover anything in depth. What I look for, instead, is guidance on the right approach and direction for topics I’m interested in.

The speakers will have been working with the new product for many months, and will be able to help you down the right roads, and miss the dead ends that they themselves have run into. Visual FoxPro and the Visual Studio environment is so rich (that’s French for ‘complicated’) that the enormous number of choices force you to make many decisions about how you’re going to tackle a problem. It’s a good idea to get advice on which way to go before starting out yourself.

Miami’s sessions on VFP 7.0 will not only cover tried and true techniques that worked in VFP 6.0 and earlier, but will prepare you for 7.0 and beyond.

The People!

The other reason people go to a conference is the people and the community. When I pay \$3000 to go to a conference, I expect to have a large number of people attend so as to maximize my opportunities to see old friends, meet new people, and expand my circle of contacts. I know that ever since I started going to

DevCon in 1992, the people part of the equation became more and more important. I gained more from lunches, dinners, and after-hours activities than I did from sitting in sessions.

With a new release being discussed in Miami, there's bound to be a zillion people there. I'm personally betting on 1500 – 1800 or so. New Orleans, on the other hand, is an unknown. The numbers I've heard so far range between 300 and 500 Fox attendees (if you include the SQL Server conference attendees, the total number will probably be over 1000.)

I'm not saying there's anything bad about a small attendance – indeed, there comes a point at which there are just too many people. With a smaller turnout, you don't have 40 people waiting around to ask questions of the speaker after a session, and you're more likely to be able to find a table in the bar. However, you don't necessarily need to drop \$3000 to do so – smaller conferences in Los Angeles, Toronto and Milwaukee (as well as VFP shows overseas in Amsterdam and Frankfurt) all have featured the same quality speakers and topics – at a third of the cost.

So, here, you decide what's important to you.

The Extras

Believe it or not, some people use additional criteria to help them choose. The locale is one of those criteria. Personally, I feel DevCon could be held at the O'Hare Sheraton in Chicago – I'm interested in the sessions and the people, and only see the sun to and from the airport. But if you want to tack on a vacation, you've got two great places to visit. Let's see. Beach. Bourbon Street. Beach. Bourbon Street. HmMMMM. Again, your call.

The one thing I would not do, if I were you, is to listen too closely to the promises of the conference organizers, and how “their conference is different.” There really isn't much a conference organizer can do to distinguish themselves from their competition without having a great idea being immediately copied by everyone else. There's nothing new or innovative in conference-land these days. As a result, the two groups are being very competitive, and I've already seen several instances of where the vision and the reality don't really line up very well. Caveat Emptor, folks.

What are YOU going to do?

When I'm on the phone or emailing someone, they inevitably ask, “Well, Whil, which one are you going to go to?” And, unfortunately, my answer isn't very helpful. I declined a speaking invite to New Orleans - between a new baby that arrived just before the Holidays and a time-consuming recovery from recent leg surgery, I just couldn't find the hours to prepare two VFP 6.0 sessions that I'd never use again. On the other hand, I'll still end up going to New Orleans, cuz, hey, my authors will have new books they'll want me to sell!

I'll see you at one or the other!