

My URMA Experience

My Background

Prior to arriving at the URMA Conference, I was surprisingly a little nervous to attend. I was relatively new to the URMA organization, and I wondered what relationships had already been established with URMA members, what Milwaukee was going to be like, and with a background in social media, what I could take away and also offer to others at this conference. With a little encouragement from my boss, Joe Kays, however, I decided to attend. Now that I look back at my four days at the conference, I am extremely grateful that I attended.

The Conference Itself

Day 1:

I attended the optional Tuesday tour day, and I'm so glad I did. I was able to get a behind-the-scenes look at the research at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee School of Freshwater Sciences. From learning about the studies involving e-coli to discovering how human prescriptions affect fish in Lake Michigan, it was great to learn about the school's research efforts. We then boarded the school's research vessel the R/V Neeskay, and I couldn't believe the size of Lake Michigan itself—it reminded me of a freshwater ocean without the waves. We then had the opportunity to tour Discovery World's Aquarium to learn about the Great Lakes and interact with stingrays, horseshoe crabs and more.

After the aquarium, we visited the Harley Davidson Museum for a presentation from Harley's communications director. I enjoyed learning about the history of Harley Davidson and its marketing efforts throughout the years. I particularly liked hearing about Harley's most recent campaigns and how they use events as a key way to attract new brand advocates.

Day 2:

The second day of the conference was in a part of town next to the former Pabst Brewery location, which provided gorgeous views of the brick architecture. The day was filled with the opportunity to meet fellow URMA members and to listen to a variety of interesting speakers. For example, Marilynn Marchione, a chief medical writer for *AP*, gave a great presentation on the dos and don'ts of writing science. A few notable takeaways from her talk that I can apply directly to my work as a social media manager: use a conversational tone, short words, write about things that people care about, and avoid overselling your work. It was also great to hear her mention UF research as well.

We also had a panel about designing magazines, and the use of cover lines or plus lines on the covers became an interesting conversation. Because research magazines have a predetermined subscription list, it was a new perspective to include short cover descriptions that could give readers a sneak peak into the magazine. The photography panel, which included tons of great examples of magazine art, was inspiring. From getting to know your subject to getting dirty in the field, there are outside-the-box ways to get that perfect shot.

After the day of presentations, it was great to chat more with URMA members at the Newsroom Pub, a historic Milwaukee bar whose walls were lined with autographed signatures of famous people. It was a wonderful evening that gave us the opportunity to get know other URMA members and allowed us to talk about the value of social media sites, such as Snapchat and Instagram, in a laid back setting.

Day 3:

On the third day, we returned to the School of Freshwater Sciences for more interesting panelists and guest speakers. It was great to hear more topics about good science writing affirmed: repurposing/revisiting old stories, what's 'new' news, and tips to brainstorming new story ideas. As a journalism graduate, I loved hearing Michael Lemonick discuss his career with Time Magazine and the history of how many of his stories developed.

After lunch on Lake Michigan, it was back to the talks. I've had an interest in doing more research-related events on campus, so I thought it was great to learn how the director of the MagLab is able to pull off a successful, engaging event for only 40 cents per person. We also had the opportunity to hear an absolutely compelling story from two Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reporters and their journey working with a very sick young boy and his family. I don't think I'm the only one who was trying to hold back tears as they discussed their emotional and professional relationship they developed with the family.

The day of conferences ended with the rapid Fire Hose Sessions, which were the perfect way to wrap up the day. I've wanted to develop some "Fast Facts" or "bragging points" for our research, so it was great to hear how Beth was able to gather data to do just that. I thought it was also very useful to hear the many tips, such as turning your phone on airplane mode while recording video and using natural light, to capture attractive images for the web using your iPhone.

Day 4:

Before I knew it, the final day of the conference arrived. We went to a gorgeous new building with a high-tech room completely surrounded by monitors. Panelists—from scientists to university communicators—discussed their involvement with the major discovery of detecting gravitational waves. It was interesting to hear different

perspectives and approaches to how each institution highlighted their involvement. However, it's also quite possible some news organizations and institutions were aware of the findings before they were published because of the amount of communication materials they were ready to promote. Ultimately, I learned it's going to be more common for hundreds, if not thousands, of institutions, to be part of a massive discovery, and it's best to think into the future to be prepared.

Looking Back

First of all, I have to give thanks to all the URMA members. They made this conference feel warm and inviting, and I was able to get to know many brilliant people throughout the week. Also, being from Florida, I never had a desire to go to Milwaukee, but it was truly awesome. I'm grateful I was able to explore a new city thanks to this conference, and it's a place I would eagerly visit again. As I look back on my many notes, I can't believe the amount of information I was able to consume in one week. I'm especially looking forward to putting all of the science writing and photography tips to work with our social media accounts. I'm definitely looking forward to the URMA Conference next year.