

# EdWeek Market Brief

K-12 Insider  
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## District Leaders Offer Insights: What They Want From Companies at Conferences

*Vendors Should Be Prepared to Answer Specific Questions About Product Price*

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**Sarah Schwartz**

Staff Writer



Every year, ed-tech companies converge on big conferences like ISTE, South by Southwest Edu, and Bett, looking to identify potential customers and promote their products.

Many educators also flock to those events, looking to pick up new ideas, notch professional development credits, and scope out products that could help them in their schools and classrooms.

When educators are approached by company reps at those events, what kinds of strategies and pitches impress K-12 school leaders the most? And what makes them wish they had skipped the conversation entirely?

For insights, *EdWeek Market Brief's* Sarah Schwartz spoke with a pair of school administrators and conference veterans.

**Michelle Murphy** is the executive director of technology services and the CTO at Coachella Valley Unified School District in Apple Valley, Calif. She has presented on technology integration at the California Educational Technology Professionals Association's Annual Ed-Tech Conference and ISTE, and has attended conferences throughout her 28 years in the education field. **Andrew Smith**, the chief strategy officer for the Rowan-Salisbury Schools' Technology Department in Salisbury, N.C., has attended conferences as a student, teacher, and administrator.

Murphy and Smith offered their thoughts about how education company employees can use conference conversations to capture their interest and gain their trust. This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

**Do you want companies to connect with you before the conference?**

## About These Insiders

**Michelle Murphy** is the executive director of technology



services and the CTO for the Coachella Valley Unified School District in Apple Valley, Calif.

**Andrew Smith** is the chief strategy officer for the Rowan-Salisbury Schools Technology Department in Salisbury, N.C.



*Smith:* It really depends on if I'm in need of something from a company. Yes, I'd love for you to talk to me, if I have a need for your product. But if you're a learning management system developer and I've got a three-year contract with a learning management system, that information's just not helpful for me at that time. If you can try and, by doing a little bit of research, discover the needs I might have, that to me is important.

*Murphy:* I'd like to know [which companies are] there, so emails are fine. I usually look through the back of the agenda where it says exhibitors or vendors, and I will go off of that and kind of just make a road map of who I need to see based on the needs of my school district.

*Vendors should be ready to talk with K-12 officials about product costs and hidden fees.*

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**Do you go into the conference with a list of companies and products in mind?**

*Smith:* We do sometimes, and sometimes we don't. Here's an example: We identified a literacy need in our district. We looked into the digital world to see if there was a tool that could help our teachers address reading across the board, at all grade levels. We discovered that there were 50 companies that could do this. We decided to send 265 teachers to ISTE. We bused them up, and we sent them all there, and we built this kind of elaborate rubric, that had every company that we were interested in meeting with. We get all these teachers to do this rubric will all these different companies. We used that data to then go back and purchase a product. That's one way we were very specific.

And then sometimes, I'll just walk to the vendor floor just to see anything new. The bigger conferences allow for more companies, it allows more exposure, so those

are the ones that I'm more just perusing.

### **What sales techniques work best? What doesn't work?**

*Smith:* Don't berate me as soon as I come into your booth. Give me a second to look around, and then I'll talk to you. To me, the best pitches are when you ask me, "What are your problems in your district, and how can I help you solve them? It may not be my company that can, but I'll point you to a company that can solve your problems." That's a really refreshing attitude to take. It's more of a conversation, it's less product-driven, and it's more relationship driven. And at that point, I'm probably going to be willing to listen to your pitch.

### **What questions should company representatives always be able to answer?**

*Smith:* If you can't give me a ballpark range what your product's going to [cost], I just don't care to listen anymore. If I've got \$20,000 and you're coming in at 40, there's no need to waste either of our time.

*Murphy:* Tell me about hidden fees, because you can purchase a product and they're like, "Oh, well, you didn't purchase the premium, or you didn't purchase that add-on." Tell me about the entire cost.

And with anything we do in education, it should be, how is it good for kids? Ultimately, everything we do in a tech department is supporting student learning.

*Smith:* I'm really interested in the ability to pilot the program. I think most companies have moved in that direction. I want to take it to a group of my best teachers and I want to pilot it with them, and I want to get their opinion before I purchase it.

### **Would you be more inclined to listen to a company if a current or former educator was initiating the conversation, as opposed to a sales or marketing**

**representative?**

*Murphy:* Yes. My background is education, and I run an IT department, so that's usually the lens in which I look for things. A person with a business degree sometimes doesn't have the lens of student achievement.

*Smith:* If they had a really good knowledge of the product, and they'd used it in their classrooms, then that's really valuable. But just being a teacher who became a vendor? That doesn't mean anything to me. I want you to be able to speak from a really first-person experience with the product, and I want you to be open about it.

If you don't tell me something that has ever gone wrong with it, then I probably won't believe you. It's that candid conversation, that real conversation, and that doesn't exist a whole lot on a vendor floor.



**Don't berate me as soon as I come into your booth.  
Give me a second to look around, and then I'll talk to  
you.**

*Andrew Smith, Rowan-Salisbury, N.C., Schools*

**At conferences, do you tend to gravitate toward, or put more trust in, big, recognizable companies?**

*Murphy:* I tend to go to the bigger ones first. The smaller ones are usually on the edges because they can't afford the bigger spaces, but I've gotten some really good ideas and things from the smaller booths. If I already know about them or something is eye-catching, I would go to a small booth for sure.

*Smith:* I am in love with startups. I love the idea of being on the ground floor of the company, and then letting my educators be developers in that process. But, there's a payoff for that. I'm not expecting to pay as much for a half-baked product that's a Kickstarter. I'm interested in those markets because the innovation occurs, in my opinion, in that small niche market of ed-tech startups. The innovation doesn't occur in the big-box companies.

### **After the conference, how should vendors follow up with you?**

*Murphy:* The emails daily should stop. Just a reminder that we met at the conference is fine—one email. I get so many vendor calls. I typically don't take calls unless it's one I'm following up.

*Smith:* Emails are just not working anymore, unless they're very customized. The best ones I've ever seen are when a vendor has learned a bit more about me than surface level and they somehow incorporate that into an email. There was a company that figured out that I was an alumni at Wake Forest University.

I guess [the company representative] was following the news and following the games, and we had just won a really big game. He took the time to figure out the correct way to say, "Go Deacs!" which is the nickname for the Wake Forest mascot, and said, "What a great game! And hey, can we come by? Can we have coffee some time and talk?" That, to me, is beyond the mass email. It's a personal experience.

*See also:*

- [How Companies Can Make the Most of Education Conferences](#)
- [The Art of the Follow-Up: Closing the Deal After a Conference](#)
- [What School Districts Mean When They Tell Companies: 'Do Your Homework'](#)

- **Email Marketing: Generating Sales Leads vs. Alienating Potential Customers**
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Tags: Chief Technology Officers (CTO), Conferences, email marketing, Event: ISTE Conference & Expo, Event: SXSWedu, K-12 Insider, Pricing, Product Pilots, Sales / Marketing, Social Media, Startups, vendors

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