Making the Most of Professional Conferences

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The somewhat tired, but still quite true, “It’s not who you know, but who knows you” maxim is something to keep in mind as the professional conference season starts to heat up. Do you have plans to attend a meeting this year? Will you be strategic about how you spend your energy when you are there? How will you use the time to strengthen your professional reputation and position yourself for new opportunities? Here are a few tips to consider.

Review the attendee list in advance. Target three or more people whose work fascinates you or who might help you extend your network. Introduce yourself or ask a mutual colleague to help you make connections. Don’t be coy when you make the successful encounter. Even the most accomplished people will be pleased to hear, “I’ve been following your research for years,” or “I always enjoy your presentations and am so pleased to finally have the opportunity to meet you.”

Don’t sit with people you recognize. It’s time for lunch and you can sit with people you know, or you can join a table of complete strangers. Always choose the latter. Doing so will give you the opportunity meet someone interesting and potentially helpful.

Help others forge connections. Think about the people your existing connections might benefit from knowing and make introductions. “Aaron mentioned his interest in using Twitter to do in-class polls and I told him you were one of the first people to adopt this approach.” The ‘expert’ in this case will appreciate the recognition and the ‘learner’ will remember that you facilitated a valuable connection.

Thank your presenters. Speakers always appreciate being recognized for their effort. While “that was great” and “I got a lot out of your session” are terrific, specific feedback is even more valuable. “The way you framed the civility continuum really changed my perspective,” or “I wasn’t aware of that court case, so thanks for the citation” are especially meaningful.

Send follow-up e-mails. A brief e-mail a few days after the conference often has more impact than a quick “thanks” after the session. Reflect upon how you will incorporate what you learned from the session and share that in your message.

Forge a connection with others who attended your session. Your fellow session attendees will sometimes raise an issue about which you have special information or insights. Sharing suggestions after the session is certainly an option and a good way to forge a new relationship. Take it a step further by forwarding relevant resources once you return home. “You and I spoke after the session on National Labor Relations Board trends and I thought you might find the following URLs helpful.”
Get to know the corporate sponsors. If your conference has corporate sponsors, don’t avoid the exhibit hall. Talk to them. Ask them about trends facing their industry. Request advice. Offer to provide them with your perspective. Corporate sponsors often have vast networks that can be enormously beneficial when you need to make a contact or even look for a new position.

Be honest about your interests and intentions. Interested in moving to the West Coast? Hoping to launch new consulting practice? Ready to pursue an expanded role? Spread the word. Don’t be annoying about it, but don’t keep it to yourself either. People tend to like helping other people, so share information even when it seems risky and you’ll often be rewarded with advice, guidance, and key leads.

Challenge your inner introvert to attend the social functions. Large conferences and meetings with unfamiliar people can be a particular challenge for introverts. While it may be tempting to hide out in your hotel room after the formal sessions are over, summon the psychic energy to attend social functions, at least for the first hour or so. Introduce yourself to people you don’t know. Find a table with one empty chair and ask if it is taken. Look for people who seem uncomfortable and put them out of their misery by starting a conversation.

Switch to club soda before you think you need to switch to club soda. Time at the bar can be a great way to get to know people, but when the conference is over, you want people to talk about your great mind, not how many gin and tonics you pounded. Career prospects are too often hampered by stories about conference attendees who turned mean, obnoxious, or incoherent after knocking back too many cocktails. Don’t be stupid.

What other words of advice do you have for conference attendees?

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