

MAXIMIZING CONFERENCES AND SEMINARS

Conferences are a great way to expand your network of connections, learn best practices and gain valuable insights into emerging issues affecting your industry. The energy created by hundreds of industry insiders meeting for several days delving into the challenges of the day can re-charge your batteries in ways few other marketing activities can. But they can also be expensive endeavors that need to be carefully managed and executed in order to reap the greatest rewards from the investment.

The following is a check list of tips and techniques which can help you get the most out of your next conference or seminar.

STEP 1: DETERMINE WHERE TO INVEST YOUR TIME, ENERGY AND RESOURCES.

SET CLEAR OBJECTIVES

Any marketing initiative should have clear objectives. Knowing what you need to accomplish will help determine the type of conference that you need to attend. You may need to learn more about an industry. It may be that you are looking for better connections to prospective clients. Or, that you are attending the conference with a client in order to deepen the relationship. You may simply be going to increase your knowledge about a subject area or industry. Be clear about what you need to accomplish so that you can be sure to attend the right kind of conference and plan your time accordingly. There may be several reasons to select a conference. If so, prioritize the reasons to clarify which are the most important. These top reasons should be your vetting process for selecting the most appropriate conference and topics.

Choose the right conference

Depending upon what you are trying to accomplish, the selection of where you go can make a big difference in the results you get from the conference. Consider the subject matter and the level of expertise the conference offers. Consider who the people are that are speaking at the conference and the level of executives attending the conference. Are these direct buyers of your services or are they referral sources? Are they your peers or will they give you access to new networks of contacts? Focusing on specific industries where your practice is easily transferable can be a valuable way to meet new contacts and quickly gain knowledge about an



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industry. Professional conferences often put you in front of people you already know but offer the ability to deepen your knowledge and skills in your area of practice.

STEP 2: PREPARE TO ATTEND THE CONFERENCE.

Preparation is essential to a successful conference however it is also the most often overlooked step in the process. Good preparation can make the difference between a mediocre conference and one that produces strong results for you and the firm.

PLAN EACH DAY'S ACTIVITIES

Develop a plan of action of what you want to learn, who you want to meet, the activities you will participate in and the steps you'll need to take to fully prepare for the conference. Review the speakers, the subject of their presentation and their bios. Decide which of them you would like to try to meet. Think about the questions you will want to ask during the Q&A portion of their talk. Plan out your attendance so that you know in advance which presentations you will attend, who you want to meet and what you want to learn.

GET A LIST OF ATTENDEES

Call the event organizers and try to get a list of the attendees in advance of the conference. Some conferences publish this along with summary information such as company, title, and geographic location of each attendee. Get whatever they have available. It won't be a complete list as there are always those that sign up last minute or change plans. But it will give you about 70% to 80% of the attendees. Review the list and mark those that you'd like to meet.

If you are speaking at the conference or seminar, ask for a list of attendees and then call several to find out what they would like to learn in your presentation. This not only helps you ensure your presentation is meeting the needs of the audience, but paves the way for you to build relationships with new connections.

REACH OUT TO LEARN WHAT TO EXPECT

If you've never been to that particular conference before get a list of past attendees and reach out to them to ask what you can do to make the most of your conference experience. Ask their opinion as to who the most influential people are that you should try to meet and any inside tips they might give you to make the most of the conference. Often there are 'not to be missed' parties, certain presentations that everyone goes to or other insider tips that are good to know as you are planning your conference strategy.

PREPARE ICE BREAKER QUESTIONS



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First impressions are the coinage of conference success. Making a good first impression occurs when you first meet someone and engage in a conversation. Prepare yourself to initiate conversations by thinking up a number of questions which are simple, non-intrusive and easy for anyone to answer. Topics such as the quality or type of food, the weather, traffic and access, the size of the conference, etc. are subject matters in which most people will engage in an informal conversation. Prepare a handful of these questions to draw upon when you are introduced to someone or to start a conversation. Having these handy can help avoid an awkward pause that can occur when two people first meet.

STEP 3: MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME AT THE CONFERENCE

Attending a conference is not a vacation. It is hard work. In fact, if you execute your conference experience correctly, you'll find that you are more tired and mentally drained than you get during a normal work day. At a conference, you are constantly 'on'. That takes energy and discipline to stay focused like that for 10 – 15 hours a day for several days in a row. So be sure to eat healthy foods in moderation, get plenty of rest and don't drink too much while at the event.

ARRIVE EARLY AND STAY LATE

Arrive early and be prepared. Have a way to take notes, bring business cards, an extra pen, mints or gum, the conference schedule and attendee list, your name tag or badge, and anything else you think you might need during the day. Getting to sessions a few minutes early enables you to get a good seat, speak to others beforehand and sometimes get time with the speaker before they go on. Linger after the presentation is over. Most people will rush out to get on their phones but those that linger behind are often more engaged in the subject matter, looking to connect with the presenters or open to meeting new people.

STAY OFF THE SMART PHONE

You can't meet people if your head is buried in your iPhone. Studies show that most people check their phones about every 6 minutes. Look around the room during a presentation and you'll see just how tied to their phones most people are. But the time that you spend on your phone is time that you are not spending making new connections. Sure, there are times when you have to take the call or answer the e-mail. But these are rare instances. Set up your out of office message to explain that you will only have period access to your e-mail and then stick to it. Keep your head up and open to making new friends.

INTRODUCE YOURSELF EFFECTIVELY



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When you meet someone for the first time, greet them with a smile, look them in the eyes, shake hands firmly (but not too tight) and show genuine interest in meeting them. Tap your inventory of prepared ice breaker questions. Ask easy questions that anyone can answer. Listen to learn what they like, what they are interested in, which aspects of the conference is most intriguing to them and why. Avoid talking about yourself until you are asked. Even when asked, keep it brief. The less you say about yourself and the more you ask about them, the more curiosity is built to learn more about you.

SOCIALIZE WITH PEOPLE YOU DON'T KNOW

At all types of events, its human nature to gravitate toward those you know well or in whom you have things in common. Resist the temptation to do what one of my managing partners used to call “clump with your buddies.” One of the greatest values of a conference is the opportunity to meet people you might not otherwise have the opportunity to meet. These opportunities don't come along often so make the most of it. Go out of your way to strike up conversations with strangers.

MAKE THE EFFORT TO INITIATE CONVERSATIONS

To establish a new relationship, you have to find common ground on which to start building the relationship. You don't have to find someone that like your hobby of skydiving. Simply being at the same conference is enough common ground to start a relationship. While you are mingling in the halls or prior to the start of the presentation, is the perfect time to initiate meeting someone new.

Be matter of fact and ask simple, open ended questions that anyone can answer. How far did you travel to get here? How does this hotel rank for you among others for this conference or what you expected? What is your weather like at home? Once you've broken the seal, offer something of value such as an interesting session you attended, news of a recent development in the industry or the best ideas that you plan to take back to the office. Watch their body language and be prepared to exit the conversation politely if they don't appear interested. Follow the flow of the conversation and stay focused on what they are saying.

Stay in the flow of traffic.

People who hang out in the corners send a signal that they don't want to engage with others. It's not typically true. People by themselves are often dying to be part of a group but simply don't know how to insert themselves in conversations or introduce themselves confidently. And, worse, most people don't typically approach others standing by themselves. If you see someone standing by themselves, do yourself and them a favor and approach them and start a discussion. Everyone is there for the same reason and most people will appreciate the chance



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to talk to someone and not look like they are by themselves. If you have time to kill, stand near the food or beverage tables or where people are congregating. Gravitare toward where there is activity. And keep on the lookout for someone to bring into the flow of the activity. They will appreciate it.

INTRODUCE OTHERS

Adding value to a new relationship leaves a strong impression. One way to add value is to share your connections with others. You never know how others will benefit from knowing one another. More often than not, especially at conferences, people you introduce will benefit from the introduction. If they do, you will as well. Make an effort to invite others into your conversation, introduce them to one another and mention how you know each other. If you can, mention something interesting about both people, whether it is personal or professional. Often, others will find something in common and it can provide energy and interest for the conversation to develop.

WATCH BODY LANGUAGE

Before approaching a group, be sure to check out their body language. Groups of two or three who are facing each other may be in a private discussion. If they have a more open stance, they are in a casual discussion and will typically welcome another person to the conversation.

TAKE NOTES

If you are good at introducing yourself, you'll meet dozens of people during the conference. Recalling the particulars of the conversations you had, their interests, information on their family or other key information will be difficult in the days after the conference if you don't take good notes immediately following your discussion. Always ask for a business card and write notes on the back of the card. For some that you meet, you may even feel comfortable writing a note while speaking to them. It's flattering. It shows that you value having met them and want to continue a relationship. Record as much information to make a future contact easier and show that you were listening.

BE PRESENT AND LISTEN

Once you have engaged in conversation with someone, be 'in the conversation'. There's a lot of activity at conferences and most people have a tendency to keep one ear on the discussion and one eye on who is walking through the room. This sends the impression that the person you are talking to is not really that important. And it is off-putting. You will set yourself apart by being present in the discussion, looking them in their eyes and truly listening to what the other is saying.



STEP 4: FOLLOW UP AFTER THE CONFERENCE

If you had a good conference, you most likely came home with several dozen business cards or names of individuals with whom you will want to follow up. Initiating contact within the first week or two is important. Plan your schedule to be able to accomplish this. Any longer than two weeks and people's memories begin to fade. The glow of meeting you will have worn off.

You'll also want to follow up with those that you were unable to connect with at the conference. Plan time to send notes to these individuals as well and send a nice note apologizing for not connecting with, offer your insights on the conference and offer to meet them at a future date.

Lastly, add the new contacts to your address book and plan out on your calendar when you will reach out again to them.

Everyone in the firm should benefit from the knowledge that you gained at the conference. Write a brief summary of the most important information gleaned from the conference and share it with others in the firm. Circulate materials where it is appropriate. In addition to key learnings, share the names and positions of the people you met at the conference. Often times, others will know the people or companies you met and new opportunities will develop through these conversations.

A successful conference takes effort. But those that put the time into it will reap the rewards.



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