

Networking for Results

THE POWER OF PERSONAL CONTACT

Conference Networking: Dealing with the new reality.

You've invested in attending your association's annual conference. The registration was pricey and the whole package will take up most of a week (if you include travel). Your primary reason for attending is that, in your mind, this conference is on the "must attend" list if you're to stay in touch with your industry and you know from past experiences that there will be a few colleagues to re-connect with. Other than that, the entire exercise will be rubbing elbows with plastic people and succumbing to rubber chicken meals.

This mindset is one of the biggest limiting factors in getting full value from attending conferences in today's difficult business environment. First of all, if you're leaving your ability to stay in touch with your industry to an annual information download, you're certainly not going to be around long. But more importantly, the higher-cost conference "myth-take" in the paragraph above is seeing your participation in a conference from a surface-only perspective when it comes to the power and potential of conference networking.

Networks now rule the world: information networks, technology networks and yes, social networks. Networking, the process of accessing and leveraging networks, has become a specific, strategic initiative for major corporations. The new value-based asset is the quantity and quality of a network. ***The new reality is that the primary objective in attending any event should be to evaluate its ability to establish and confirm a contribution to increasing or strengthening your social network.***

This document is meant as a call-to-arms for any professional planning to attend a conference in the coming months. Change your mindset and your methodology from simply experiencing the event to maximizing every seemingly random contact and every conscious connection. Your future survival and success depends on it. Here are four conference network principles that support this theory along with strategies and tactics to leverage each.

1. **Conferences create network convergence.** A conference brings together a number of individuals who each have their own circles of information, insights and influence. They have the power to support and strengthen you in ways you've never thought of. Imagine gaining access to even just one or two of these new resources.
2. **Conferences foster network context.** Conferences attract like-minded individuals who have similar interest. Research on networks has confirmed that the fastest way to create and strengthen connections is to build context, considered the super-glue of networks.
3. **Conferences offer multiple network connection opportunities.** One of the incredible network asset-building capacities of conferences is that they offer a limitless number of connection points through seminars, banquets, social gatherings and random contacts.

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4. **Conferences act as network flash points.** Seemingly random conference contacts are really ignition points that hold within them the power to bring networks together. The key to seizing this potential is to realize that there is value in this person, then persisting in the conversation until you discover where it lies.
5. **Conferences contain the foundation for relationship-building, the core of social networks.** Translating conference connections into resources and rewards lies in the ability to convert their contribution to the relationship-building process. These contacts, when nurtured and strengthened in the days and weeks following the initial connection, will provide the opportunities and options for future success.

Every conference acts as an amazing personal magnet, attracting incredible resources that would otherwise be unavailable or inaccessible. Their potential to incrementally drive your network is almost unimaginable. However, in the new conference environment, it's necessary to radically change event beliefs and behavior. Here are ten tactics that will have incredible impact in converting your conference networking into a network expansion strategy.

1. **Develop a conference networking mindset.** Accept that networking is one of your highest-value activities at a conference. Invest time to develop a positive attitude about meeting others. Remind yourself of your best connections. Think in terms of making new friends. Build your self-esteem & self-confidence.
2. **Have a conference networking plan.** Just as you would strategize about what events to attend or information to source, invest time to think about who you'd like or want to meet. Having a clear picture of who these people are will allow you to communicate it to others you meet and just might help it happen.
3. **Expand your awareness about conference networking.** Every person you meet has the potential to help you. Look past your initial thoughts if there doesn't seem to be a connection. Dig deeper to find the value the other person has. It often takes some time but is usually worth the effort, and often comes out in the last few seconds of a conversation.
4. **Increase your conference networking activity.** Develop the discipline of getting out of your comfort zone to meet new people. Sit beside strangers at seminars, excuse yourself from colleagues at banquets and sit beside new contacts. You will be amazed at the payoff of these small investments.
5. **Focus on relationship-building.** The dichotomy of networking success is that a three-minute conversation is enough to create the foundation of a long term relationship. Invest more time, more effort and more energy in showing others you care about them. Be sincerely curious. Seek to build context by finding areas of common or complementary focus, interest or need.
6. **See new contacts as a research project.** Presume every new contact holds some potential for you, either professionally or personally. Challenge yourself to discover what piece of information, what insight or opportunity this person holds. This will position you uniquely in the other person's mind. He /she will remember you for this.

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7. **Discover value areas.** One of the most effective networking tactics, especially at a conference, is to actively work to discover a value area the other person has. This could be some important item, issue or requirement. Having this fact in mind, you can often connect with others who may have the ability to resolve this problem or fill this need, thereby creating an incredible impact
8. **Collect business cards.** This tactic alone is one that pays enormous dividends. No matter how brief or insignificant-looking the networking encounter, ask for a business card. Having her/his contact information may be invaluable. Effective networking is not about giving out business cards, it's about gathering them.
9. **Be selective in following up.** Remember, not all conference contacts are created equal and prioritize your follow up on those individuals where you had the strongest connection. Continue building the relationship by focusing on the common issues you discussed, the value areas you discovered or the potential you feel the relationship had.
10. **Contribute to others' lives.** The single most powerful strategy for getting others to remember you and work on your behalf is to contribute to their lives. As you follow up with your contacts, work diligently to find ways to help them.

In today's hi-tech business environment, the hi-touch impact of conference connections holds amazing power to link into a network of resources, revenues and rewards. The requirement to unlocking this incredible potential lies in being more aware of the power of conference contacts, becoming more skilled at managing these time-limited yet potentially-productive interactions and managing the relationship-building process that solidifies these future assets.

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