

Purposeful Networking

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Conference season is upon us. It is next to impossible to network with every single person of the thousands in attendance, and frankly, we do not necessarily need to. Conferences are a great time to learn, connect with old friends and colleagues, and learn from new people. Here are some tips to help you purposefully network at your next conference.

1. Define your learning outcomes.

In order to network with purpose, we must first begin with the end in mind. How often do we put intentional thought into what we wish to learn and who we wish to learn from as a result of attending a conference? As a result, we end up flipping through the program book right before a session to find one that looks interesting, or we bump into people we have been meaning to meet accidentally. We must take a more intentional approach in our conference learning and networking experiences – inside and outside the educational sessions.

Consider your learning outcomes for the conference. What do you want to learn? Who you want to learn from? How do you want to be changed as a result of attending? When you begin to define what it is you wish to get out of the experience, it will allow you to better identify how to, in fact, get those results. Spend some time several weeks before the conference reflecting on your professional areas of growth and how the conference might help you improve in those areas. Create your own learning outcomes for the conference so you can begin to purposefully identify the environments and people who can help you attain them.

2. Match learning Outcomes to people and educational session topics.

Identified learning outcomes allow you to better identify the people with whom you need to network or the educational sessions you should attend. Choose educational sessions before the conference based on topics and presenters. Make a target list of people with whom you want to meet, (re)connect, learn, or have a conversation. Identify people you already know who can help connect you with those individuals. If you do not have a common connection, attend one of their sessions as a way to build an opportunity to connect. Keep your target list handy. Ask people you meet if they know the individuals on your list and if they could introduce you.

3. Schedule time with those individuals before the conference.

Do not wait until you arrive at the conference to try to connect with the people on your target list. The minute people arrive at any conference is the minute they no longer have time in their schedule. Now that you have a target list, reach out to some of those people before the conference even begins and get on their schedule before they get there. This is not always an easy task, especially if they have no idea who you are. Here are a couple quick tips to make those attempts more successful:

o Introduce yourself and use a disarming statement.

People want to know who you are and what you want relatively quickly in the email or phone call. Use a statement early in the introduction to “disarm” their defense by telling them how you know them (a mutual connection) or why you reached out to them (their expertise). It allows for people to actually hear what you have to say after “hello.”

- **Tell them *why* you want to meet with them.**
The idea of meeting with someone, when you do not know why you are meeting with them is not very appealing. Make your case for why they should take time out of their busy schedule to spend time with you. What do you want to learn from them? What questions do you have? What topics do you wish to discuss?
- **Set a specific time frame.**
Be specific about the time frame of the meeting. If I do not know how long it is going to take, I am more reluctant to say "yes." Use 15-20 minute time blocks. It is enough time for you to make a connection but not so much time that it feels intrusive.

4. Do not waste your time standing in line.

Long lines of people waiting to speak to the session presenters often follow great educational sessions. Do not waste your precious networking time standing in line. Before the session begins, introduce yourself to the presenters, tell them why you are looking forward to their session, grab a business card, and sit down. If you like the session, you already have the valuable information you need to follow up with them.

5. Do not get star-struck.

It is hard not to get star-struck by the prominent people in our industry – the great researchers, the authors of theory, or dynamic administrators. While those people are important and would be great to network with, do not forget about all the other amazing and talented professionals who are also at the conference. I am not suggesting you should not try to meet the "super stars," just do not waste all your time hanging out by Barry Posner's limo.

6. Make a friend.

Go to the educational sessions you purposefully chose and sit by someone you do not know, engage them in conversation, and ask them why they chose the session. Seek every opportunity to position yourself in a position to meet someone new. Turn to the person next to, behind or in front of you, and say, "hi." You never know where the conversation will take you.

7. Do not skip the exhibitors.

Take a look at the list of exhibitors who will be at the conference before you get there. Schedule time for yourself to attend the exhibit hall and hand pick the exhibitors you would like to talk to, learn from, or connect with. Many of the exhibitors honestly want to help and are glad to have a conversation about how they can.

8. Follow up or fail.

Before you leave any meeting or conversation with any new connection, make sure you use the magic phrase, "I'll follow up with you." That phrase gives you permission to call or send an email to them after the conference. Set specific appointment times with yourself in your schedule to do that follow up within a week of the conference. You can schedule follow-up calls weeks beyond that, but everyone should hear from you within a week of the conference.

Purposeful networking begins by simply putting some thought into with whom you want to network and how you are going to network with them – well in advance. Do not wait until you get to the conference to make those decisions: start making them now. Focus on people who can help you become a better professional, learn something new, or overcome a challenge – not just the “big names” of our field. Overall, understand there is great learning that occurs through the listening in the educational sessions, but there is even greater learning that occurs in the casual conversations before the sessions begin, in the hallways, and after the sessions end through great networking.