

The Conference Guide

Tips and Tricks for Making the Most of
Your Conference Experience



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If you fail to plan out your conference experience ahead of time, you are planning to fail.

Don't just passively attend a conference, use it to advance your business goals and career objectives. Make sure you set yourself up to take away as much as possible from your experience!

Before the Conference



- See if there are any opportunities to participate in the conference as more than attendee. Whether you apply to be a speaker or volunteer for a committee, you will have the opportunity to gain visibility and make sure you stand out from the crowd. Sometimes conferences even offer discounted or free registration if you offer your services.
- If you are speaking at a conference, don't rely on the conference to do all your marketing. Use this opportunity to create some buzz around your presentation- let people in your social networks know when and where you are speaking. And don't be afraid to ask coworkers to share your posts to increase your reach!
- If you receive a pre-conference attendee list, scan it for people you already know and reach out to set up meetings. Conferences are not only an excellent way to meet new people and form business relationships, they are also a perfect opportunity to reconnect with clients and vendors you have worked with in the past to strengthen those relationships. Share the attendee list with your coworkers and make an effort to reach out to their clients if you have time. Be a representative on your company's behalf.

- Once you have planned who you would like to reconnect with at the conference, go over the attendee list again and make a list of the people and companies you would like to meet, and send them a note to introduce yourself ahead of time, if possible. Set goals for the types of people you want to network with, so your connections will be more meaningful. And don't forget to keep an eye out for folks you already interact with on social media.
- Plan out your sessions! Don't show up to a conference without a game plan. Take the time to look through the schedule and decide which sessions and events will help you get the most out of your experience. And always make sure you have a back up plan in case your chosen sessions don't work out. Session recordings and materials are frequently available online after the event, so keep this in mind when choosing which sessions to attend. If it's a topic you could easily get caught up on after the event, it might be worth skipping. Aim for a broad range of topics for a well-rounded experience. If you're attending the conference with a coworker, it might be tempting to attend all the sessions together, but you should consider dividing up the sessions to cover more ground and get the most out of the conference. You can swap notes and discuss what you learned later. Lastly, don't forget to allow for a little downtime so you aren't overscheduled and overwhelmed.

- Decide how you would like to take notes at the conference: Pen and paper? Laptop? Tablet? And make sure you have chargers, etc. Keep in mind, if you are bringing a laptop, you will likely have to carry it around all day, so try not to pack too heavy! If you plan on taking photos or video, find out the conference's policies ahead of time.
- Try to avoid making non-work plans in the evenings. As tempting as it is to catch up with friends who live in the city you are visiting, you might miss out on a lot of spontaneous networking opportunities.



- Download the mobile conference app, if there is one. Apps make navigating a conference much easier, and many apps have social features that allow you to connect with other conference attendees in real-time.

- If you are planning to write blog posts about your sessions, write as much as you can about the topic ahead of time, and fill in quotes and information from the speakers later.
- For managers who have employees attending the conference, make it a goal for attendees to create content while they are there or ask them to be prepared to debrief others when they return to the office. Ask them to bring back (or make copies of) materials to share when possible.
- Plan ahead to leave as much of your work at the office as possible. If you can, delegate someone to handle your calls and emails and have them contact you only when something requires your immediate attention, otherwise set up specific times to touch base so you won't constantly be distracted by email and voicemail. If you are unable to have someone cover for you, include a message in both your email autoreply and your voicemail letting customers know you are attending a conference and to expect a slight delay in response time, and give them a way to get in touch with you if they have an urgent matter.

During the Conference



- Register as early as possible to avoid waiting in long lines. If you do get stuck waiting, use this time to your advantage and start networking! Don't stare down at your phone, as it makes you look unapproachable. Strike up a conversation with those around you. You don't have to cut straight to business talk, many people attend conferences alone and it's nice to have a familiar face to run into later.



- Practice how you plan to introduce yourself to people a/k/a your “elevator pitch”. You probably groaned when you read that, but if there’s any time to have an elevator pitch, it’s at a conference! People will appreciate knowing if you’re someone they should just have a friendly chat with, or if you’re someone they should be networking with. Which brings me to...

- **Don't forget to exchange business cards!** This is why you brought them! You don't have to hand them out to every person you meet - and you really shouldn't. People aren't going to care about exchanging cards with someone they don't have any need to contact. How many times have you looked at a business card after an event and had no idea who the person was? How many of these cards just end up in the trash? Always be polite, of course, if someone offers you their card, offer yours in return. But make sure you have an organization system in place. Keep the cards you collect in 3 separate stacks: a "contact immediately" stack, an "add to my database for future reference" stack, and a "hey, thanks for your card" stack (that, let's be honest, you're probably going to end up tossing. It's ok, everyone does it). When someone hands you their card, don't just put it in your pocket- take a moment to look at it. It shows a higher level of engagement, and a lot of people are proud of their card designs. It only takes a second, and it makes a big impact. Lastly, as soon as you have a chance, jot down a few notes on the cards of all the people you plan to follow up with to remind you who they were, where you met, what you discussed, and why you want to contact them. This will be valuable when you call or email them! Additionally, if you use a CRM you can enter the notes on their contact record.

- Take the time to familiarize yourself with the conference hall. Know where you need to be, when you need to be there, and practice your routes so you don't risk getting lost and showing up late. If there isn't a conference app, use your phone to take a photo of any maps you need, or download them from the venue's website.



- Before the conference, find out the conference hashtag so you can follow what's going on via Twitter and/or Facebook. This is a great way to interact with other attendees and to discover break out events as they are happening. You don't want to miss out on anything valuable!

- It's great to have a coworker with you at the conference so you have someone to hang out with, but make sure you aren't exclusively hanging out with the people you already know. And when you are talking to them, make sure you still look approachable. People are much less likely to approach groups of only two people as it may look like you are having a private conversation. Be sure to look around and smile so people aren't afraid to come over and join your conversation. Invite people over to you, or join them in their groups. Don't appear cliquish or you will miss out on a lot of opportunities to meet people. If you see someone standing alone looking around nervously, introduce yourself and make some introductions for them. Conferences can be an introvert's worst nightmare, and chances are they will be grateful if you help them navigate the crowd a little.
- Decide on a place for dinner or drinks, and throughout the day tell people to meet you in a central location at a specific time if they would like to join you. You'll have your own informal networking event before you know it! If you're attending the conference with a coworker, instead of just having dinner together every night, make it a goal for each of you to invite at least one other person to dinner. You already know each other, so you shouldn't waste any opportunities to make new connections.



- Don't make plans in lieu of attending any social events hosted by the conference. Attending these events can be one of the most important parts of the conference since you can interact with other attendees in a more casual setting. And it goes without saying, but use your best judgment when drinking at these events. It's still a professional gathering and you are a spokesperson for your company. You can even ask the bartender for a club soda, and no one will be the wiser.

- If you are unsure whether a particular session is going to be the best use of your time, or if you think there is a chance you may have to leave early, always try to sit in the back or at least take an aisle seat so as not to disturb others if you need to exit. If you have the opportunity to notify the speaker ahead of time that you may need to leave, they will probably appreciate knowing it wasn't something they said that made you bolt. (This applies mainly to smaller sessions where it's nearly impossible to leave unnoticed, but it could also apply to any speaker you don't want to risk offending! Though if it's a client giving a boring presentation, you might just have to tough it out.)
- Never be afraid to ask the speaker questions at appropriate times during a session. Don't interrupt them or derail their presentation, but if you need clarification on something or have something valuable to add, speak up! Chances are other people might have the same question, or could learn from the conversation as well. Most speakers dread having a disengaged audience and welcome the interaction. This doesn't mean you should ever "heckle" a speaker. If you disagree with something they said, unless it's an important correction, or something that needs clarification, approach them or contact them after their talk and discuss your thoughts and concerns privately. And don't carry on your own conversations with the person next to you, or be otherwise disruptive. Even if the speaker can't hear you, you might be distracting those around you.

- If you don't get a chance to ask your question during a presentation, you can always ask the speaker on twitter- use the conference hashtag so others can follow the conversation as well!
- After a session, If you find yourself with some free time, linger afterwards to introduce yourself to the speaker and tell them you enjoyed their presentation, or stick around to chat about the session with others. There's no easier icebreaker than starting a conversation about an event you just shared. (Just be mindful that even if you aren't in a hurry, others might be, so be sensitive to visual cues that someone might be too busy to chat. And obviously if the room is being set up for the next talk, move your conversations into the hall.)
- The sessions you attend can provide you with content for numerous blog posts, so be sure to take good notes. If there is a keynote or major talk, live-tweet it using the conference hashtag. Many people who cannot attend the conference will be following along on twitter, and will appreciate being updated on important information and announcements. It's also a great way to gain industry recognition and attract new followers.
- Try to attend sessions outside your specialty area whenever possible. It's good to get outside your normal thinking pattern sometimes, and who knows- you might discover a new interest or opportunity!

- It's also wise to attend sessions on topics you are very familiar with- you may think you already know everything there is to know about the topic, but the questions asked by other attendees during these sessions can give you valuable insight into what your customers' needs and concerns are. Consider it market research.



- Come up with a question to ask people you meet, and ask them if you can videotape their answer. You can share your recording as a video blog, or bring it back to share with your team. It also gives you a great excuse to talk to people.
- When posting about the conference on social media, don't forget to interact with other posters. Like, comment on, and share their material as well. Many will return the favor.

If You're Presenting at the Conference



- Designate someone from your team to follow the conference on social media so they can track any mentions of you or your company in real-time and respond quickly to questions and inquiries.
- During your talk, include content that is quotable to guarantee more people will share it on social media.
- Find a way to include your audience in your presentation: Have a giveaway item to encourage the attendees to answer questions. Take a photo of the crowd and encourage them to share it or tag themselves. Be creative!



- Always personally follow up with questions on social media and thank people who shared your content.

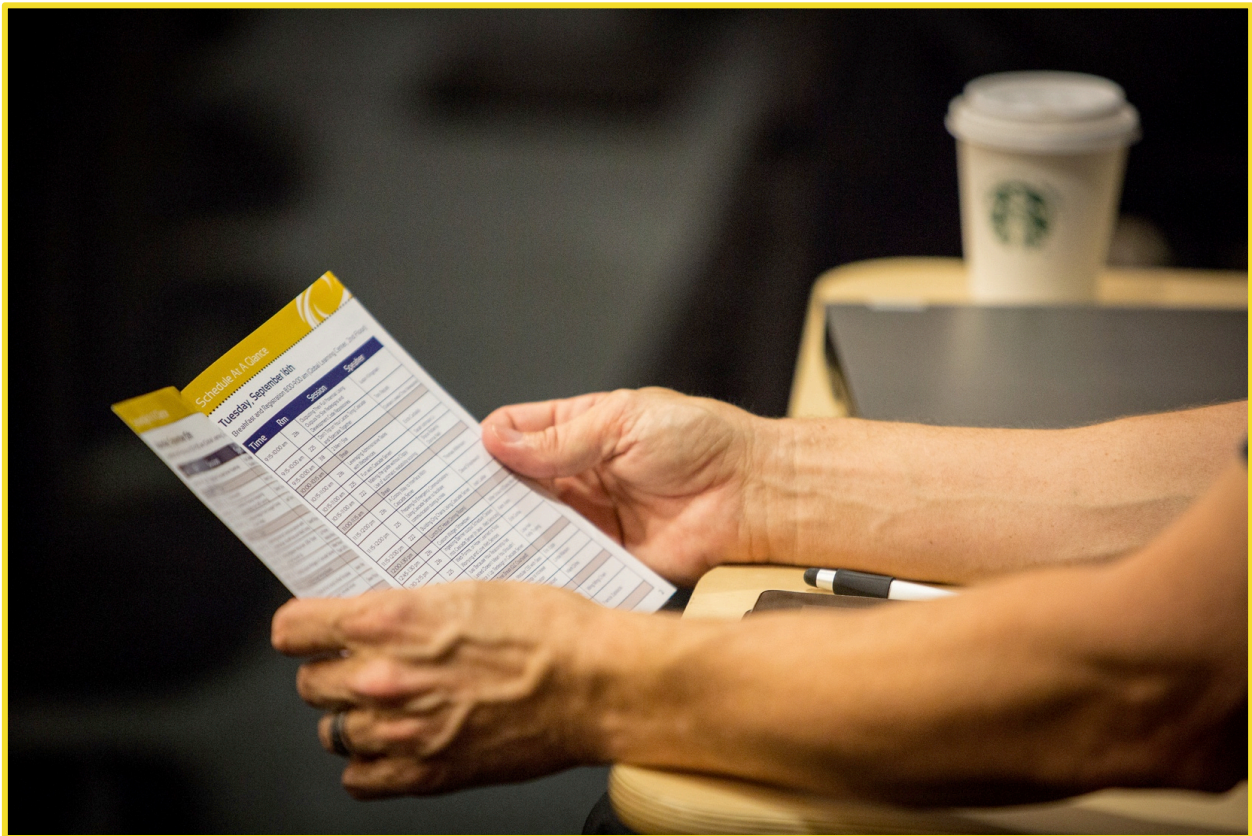
After the Conference



- Immediately after the event wraps up, write down your top blog post ideas and your top business ideas. Begin writing your posts while you are traveling home while everything is still fresh in your mind.
- As soon as you are back in the office, begin following up with the people you met at the conference. Do not wait long to do this, you want to reach out before people have a chance to forget you. Send out LinkedIn invites with a personal note, or email the contacts to let them know you enjoyed meeting them. Be sure to reference something you discussed (this is where those business card notes come in handy!). Include an action-item when applicable. Always give the person a reason to follow up with you. If it's a connection you plan to build a business relationship with, set up a phone call or face-to-face meeting. But remember- this is relationship building, not cold calling! Don't bombard the person with sales pitches and marketing emails.



- Add your new contacts to your CRM along with the notes you took after your meeting. Don't try to keep track of dozens of business cards.
- Plan a meeting to debrief your coworkers who did not attend the conference. Share what you learned and distribute any materials you found helpful. If there are slides or recordings of any of the sessions available, share the links with everyone. You will show your boss it was a worthwhile investment to send you to the conference, and hopefully your colleagues will reciprocate next time they attend an event.



- Don't throw away your conference program! Programs can be a great resource after the conference. Think of it as a directory of experts in your field. Maybe you will want to invite one of the speakers to an event you host in the future.

- Say your “Thank yous”! Thank your boss for letting you attend the conference. Thank the conference for having you. Thank any panelists you presented with. Thank any bloggers who covered your sessions. Thank your coworkers for covering your workload. A little gratefulness goes a long way!
- Attending conferences is one of the best things you can do for your career, so make it a goal to attend them on a regular basis. Track your professional growth over time, you’ll be amazed at everything you have accomplished!

