

Making the Most of Your Time

By Marianne Trost, The Women Lawyers Coach

While sometimes we can only spare enough time to simply attend a conference, there are techniques you can use to significantly increase the business development value of attending conferences. Growing your client base is all about relationships – making new ones and nurturing, growing, and expanding new ones – which can be time consuming. The following tips will help you make the most of your time.

Reach out in advance. After you decide to attend a conference, think through your contacts to identify those you met the last time you attended. Send a quick email letting them know you will be attending and that you are hopeful they will be attending, as you would like to see them again. Even if your contacts are not able to attend the conference, reaching out in advance is a great way to stay in touch.

Coordinate in advance. If your contacts will be attending the conference, coordinate in advance to sit together at a particular session, meet up at a networking event, grab coffee during a specific break, join each other for lunch, or sign up for the same leisure activity you are certain to catch up and get re-connected. Coordination is key, particularly when the conference is large. If appropriate, ask your contact for her cell number so you can text once you are on site.

Invite others to attend. Attending a conference can be a great way to nurture and expand relationships with contacts you would like to get to know better. Think through whom you know that would enjoy the content of the conference and ask them if they have an interest in attending. Offer to make introductions for them at the conference. When attending together you can sit with them and participate in a shared experience that can serve as the context for future conversations. Even if your contact can't attend, reaching out with an invitation will demonstrate your interest in growing the relationship.

Review the list of speakers and panelists. If you know any of the presenters, send a quick email letting them know you saw that they will be speaking and you look forward to attending their presentation (only do this if you plan to attend their presentation, of course, as authenticity is a must!) If you have not met them, do a little online research to learn more about them and make a mental note to introduce yourself after their presentation. Doing a little legwork will make it easier to go up after the presentation and start a conversation and open the door for an exchange of business cards and follow up.

Engage fully. Most of us have been tempted to run off to our hotel room and get some work done while attending a conference. With the exception of emergencies, engage as fully as you can in the opportunity to invest in developing your relationships - attend the sessions, introduce yourself to new people, connect with contacts, participate in leisure activities, and give it your all.

Pace yourself. If you are an introvert and find conferences draining, honor your personal style and pace yourself. Give yourself permission to step out for a few minutes - not an

hour - to get some fresh air, seek out smaller groups for conversation, network in tandem, and use your personal time in the evening to rejuvenate through music, exercise, or your favorite book, recognizing that re-energizing is necessary to keeping your batteries charged throughout the conference.

Take notes. While talking with people, engage as an active listener. Take mental note of things in common, shared interests, possible areas of needs, introductions you can make, and ways in which you can be helpful or serve as a resource. After your conversations, take notes on your iPhone or on the back of a business card. Relying solely on your memory and waiting until you return to the office can put you at risk for “was she the one I was talking to about...?” Your notes will help create context when following up.

Follow up. This is the most important part (and the topic of a future article, in and of itself!) Deliver on anything you promised at the conference e.g. an e-introduction, a copy of an article, a link to a website, a blog post, or information that is of value and interest to the people with whom you spoke. Remember that your responsiveness and ability to follow up create an impression. Send an email to let each contact know that you enjoyed meeting/seeing them. Include a personalized sentence e.g. how you enjoyed talking with them about x, y, and z, or how you enjoyed doing the breakout session exercise with them. Let your contacts know that you look forward to staying in touch. Attach your VCard so they can easily download your contact information into their Outlook. Invite them to connect on LinkedIn or other social media.

Calendar. Keep track of when you plan to follow up with the new and existing contacts you met at the conference. No two relationships are the same, so you will need to ask yourself whether one week, six weeks, or two or three months would seem like the appropriate amount of time in between “touches”. If you don’t know, put yourself in their shoes and ask yourself what you would want if they were following up with you. Then make a note on your calendar to follow up at that time. Before you know it, it will be time to reach out in advance of the conference again and you can repeat the tips above to keep your relationships progressing.

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