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Maximizing Your Next Conference: A Little Preparation Goes a Long Way

by Marianne Trost, *The Women Lawyers Coach*



To attend or not to attend? Getting the most out of a conference is key, especially when the investment involves non-billable time, travel costs, registration fees, and shifting other priorities in your life so you can make the time to attend. While most people think the benefit of a conference occurs on-site at the conference, at least a third of the value gained from attending conferences occurs as a result of the preparation done in advance. The following tips can help you get the most out of a conference before you even attend:

Plan Ahead – Put the conference on your calendar as soon as you get a notice of the dates. Block off the travel time, the conference time, and also the time you will need for follow up afterwards. You can always take the conference off your calendar down the road, if necessary. Getting the dates on your calendar early can help you better manage your priorities and pace yourself so you don't get overloaded.

Get the List of the Attendees in Advance – Some organizations will provide a list of attendees in advance of the conference. You may need to call and ask for it. Review the list for existing contacts, clients, prior clients, referral sources, colleagues at past firms, contacts in other states, people you have communicated with by email but never met in person, and others you would like to meet. If you can't get a list before the conference, see if you can get one during or after the conference so you can follow up easier.

Connect Ahead of Time – Reach out to attendees ahead of time and let them know you are looking forward to seeing them (always be truthful, of course!). Also reach out to other contacts who may not know about the conference but might have an interest in attending. Let them know you plan on being there. Even if they don't end up going to the conference, you will have created a "touch" by reaching out. Sometimes just a simple email can spark a productive dialogue that might not otherwise have happened.

Loop Back to Participants from Previous Years – Keep track of whom you meet at a conference and reach out to them in advance of the next one. You can utilize this type of "touch" to ask how they are, let them know you are planning on attending, see if they might want to attend a particular break-out session with you, ask if they want to join you at a lunch or for a recreational activity, or meet up during happy hour. Even if they won't be attending in any given year, looping back allows you to stay in touch.

Read Up on the Presenters or "Faculty" - Get up to speed on the topics to be presented, the speakers, and panelists. Be strategic about your selections and don't be shy about going up afterwards and letting the speakers know that you enjoyed their presentation "particularly the part about..." Specifically referencing what you liked or found helpful is valuable feedback and usually appreciated. It also gives you the opportunity to connect with presenters and lay the groundwork for follow up after the conference.

Know What You Have in Common – Give thought to the objectives and interests of the people attending the conference. What do you have in common?



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What will people be talking about? Brush up on that. A little bit of preparation goes a long way when meeting new people, especially when there are multiple networking events. The more you know about the interests of the people attending, the easier it will be to get beyond talk about the weather and the food.

Set Goals – Identify ahead of time what you want to accomplish at the conference. Do you want to network with referral sources in other states, meet a few GCs, reconnect with a past client, introduce yourself to the conference leaders and let them know of your interest in serving on a committee? When you have goals in mind, you minimize the risk of doing random acts of business development.

Think Through Your Accomplishments – Skilled networkers spend a little time in advance of attending events thinking about the cases and matters on which they have worked that may be of interest to the people they will meet at the conference. Think through your role and your accomplishments so that when someone asks you what type of work you do, you can give an example, e.g. “I am an intellectual property attorney that helps clients protect their patents. For example, I recently litigated a case for a large international company whose animation technology had been used without permission when developing a new phone app.” People remember stories, examples, facts and figures. Make yours memorable. Preparing examples ahead of time (while always being careful not to disclose client privileged information), makes it easier to slip them into a conversation in a natural way.

Pick Your Activities Strategically – Align your goals with your activities. Where are the people you would like to meet going to be congregating? Which break-out sessions make sense for your professional goals? What extra-curricular activities will you enjoy while both making new contacts and re-energizing yourself? Giving even a little advanced thought to how you would like to best utilize your time will help you maximize each activity.

Preparing ahead of time for a conference is a great example of how working smarter, not harder, can pay off. Doing some of the tips above will help you get more value out of the time and money you invest in conferences. Remember, though, that it doesn't stop with the preparation. A third of the value of conferences stems from engaging fully while you are present and another third is dependent on the follow up after you leave the conference. We will cover those tips in a subsequent article.

Marianne Trost is the Women Lawyers Coach. She is a nationally recognized trainer and international author, speaker, and coach. Marianne's mission is to provide women lawyers with practical tips, guidance, inspiration and support to grow their own books of business, create self-determination in their careers, and manage their advancement strategically. www.thewomenlawyerscoach.com

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