

The Art of Conventioneering

Get ready, get set, then go.

By Anne Baber and Lynne Waymon

What's so tough about going to a convention? It's easy. You send in your registration fee and go. You assume you'll get something out of it. Your organization also assumes that you'll come back from Miami with something besides a tan.

But what you actually gain from a conference, conference planners say, depends on the tactics you use.

"I don't think delegates give enough thought to what they want to accomplish," says Bob Stewart, executive vice president for the Association of Diesel Specialists.

People go to conventions for information, inspiration and interaction. Meeting planners can almost guarantee that attendees will get the first two items on the list from the speakers and the sessions. But it's much harder for the planners to ensure that attendees make contact on more than a superficial level.

One attendee described a miserable moment: "I was standing in line at the coffee shop waiting to get a seat for lunch. In line with me were people who were attending the same conference, and nobody was talking. We might as well have been back at the office, sitting at our desks. I waited for somebody to say hello. Then I realized I felt like a wallflower at the eighth-grade dance. It was an awful feeling. I didn't like it. And what's more, I knew that I wasn't getting as much out of being at the conference as I could."

There's an art to conventioneering. To take charge of getting the interaction you came for and getting the most out of the experience, here are some tips on what to do before you go, once you're there and afterward.

BEFORE YOU GO

Unfortunately, most people spend

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lots of time picking and packing their convention wardrobes, but very little time thinking about how to get the most out of meeting so many people.

Make a list. Jot down questions you have, problems you want to solve, jobs you'd like to investigate (if you're job hunting or even just thinking of job hunting in the future), leaders and speakers you admire and want to meet, and people whose jobs are similar to yours, so you can swap

experiences. Use your own needs to create your own conference agenda. "What I Want To Get."

"Meet with your staff," suggests Stewart. "Review the relationships you have with the suppliers you'll see at the conference. Are there any problems? Have them in mind when you see the people from a particular company across the table at lunch or in their booth at the trade show." The trade-show exhibitors often are



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better prepared than delegates, Stewart believes. They will be trying to sell, establish new business relationships, find new distributors, cultivate current customers and expand the business they are doing with them, and solve problems.

"I'm convinced that delegates aren't giving enough thought to what they want to accomplish," Stewart says. "There are a lot of opportunities that are being missed or not utilized.

"So, take stock of your company's operations and think about the challenges you face. Then, when you talk with people, you can ask if they are facing the same things and find out how they are dealing with them. You should go home with some new insights, new approaches, and—if nothing else—the comfort that everybody's trying to cope with the same obstacles and opportunities you are."

Blanca Diaz, manager of corporate meeting planning at McGraw-Hill Inc., says, "The best networkers plan ahead and think about who'll be there." If you receive a list of attendees prior to the conference, you can call people and make arrangements to have breakfast or a drink. Or use your association directory to set up appointments. Groups of four to six provide the most conversational possibilities, so include others. Invite a speaker to join you. Putting a group together also gives you a reason to connect. Consult your agenda to remind yourself what you want to find out at these meetings.

List also "What You Have To Give." If you know what you have to give to other attendees, you'll feel more comfortable making contact. Be ready to tell people about useful or interesting books, opportunities you are aware of, trends you've discovered, solutions you've come up with to any challenge in your work or your life.

Get a job. Plan to report on some aspect of the conference to a person in your organization, or to your company newsletter, or to your local association. Having to pass information along will give you a reason to meet people, ask questions and take notes. Also, find the name of a committee person, call him or her, and offer to help on site.

"Newcomers can be intimidated at seeing old-timers gravitating toward

each other," notes Stewart. "So, if you're a newcomer, don't just attend, get involved. Volunteer for a committee, serve on a task force or just help at the registration desk."

Check out the city. Browse through travel magazines and ask the destination's convention and tourism bureau to send you a packet of information. Take advantage of the location. Does your company have an office there that you might visit to increase your knowledge of the business? Is there a key customer you could meet with?

Plan time to unwind. Do something you've never done before, something you couldn't do at home. Your out-of-the-ordinary experience could well have a business payoff. Don took a Sunday morning gospel music tour of Harlem when he was attending a convention in New York City. Six months later, he was producing a video program for his company and searching for appropriate music. Then he remembered a gospel song he'd heard in Harlem. It turned an ordinary video show into an award-winner.

BEING THERE

Choose your program carefully. Select sessions to attend based on your agenda. Focus on the knowledge you need and the skills you want to develop. Also, pick a "wild-card session"—one that you can see no earthly use for at the moment. Inevitably, that's the one that will open new doors for you.

Be visible. Don't just sit there, participate in sessions. To ask a question, stand and speak loudly. Give your name and company. Your question will draw others to you. Seek out other people who have asked questions and follow up with them. And introduce yourself to the speaker before the session, suggests Tom Antion, a nationally known humorist from Landover Hills, Maryland, who speaks to corporate and association audiences. "I'm always eager to know who's in the audience and what your issues are," he says. "I often mention attendees who've talked with me in my speeches."

Don't slavishly attend sessions.

Sometimes, the conversation you're having in the hall or over a cup of coffee is more valuable. You can always buy an audiotape of a session.

"Associations sometimes overschedule delegates from dawn to dinner," says Stewart. "I'm taking a hard look at the structure of our conferences to make sure we are allowing opportunities for informal networking."

Angie Fischer, director of meetings and conventions for the Society of Industrial and Office Realtors, has an innovative idea for making networking work. She has created OppNets (Opportunity Networks). Last year, some 300 out of 400 conference attendees signed up. These OppNets meet for two hours during the twice-yearly conferences. Their 20 members are encouraged to stay in touch.

"We wanted to provide something unique, something participants couldn't get anywhere else," Fischer says. "Networking is the key for our members." She's careful not to assign competitors to the same OppNet, so that information flows.

"Even if the sessions are just average, if people have a chance to make contact on a deeper level, they will go away happy—and they will come back to the next conference. The OppNet is their responsibility. If they don't come, they will be missed, and they might miss something important," she says.

BACK HOME

Follow up with people you met. That's why you collected all those business cards. Drop a note to say, "It was so nice to meet you." Send your contacts an article that expands on something you talked about. And, before the next conference, call and ask, "How about meeting me for breakfast?"

That's the way to make a conference count. ♦

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