

# GETTING THE MOST OUT OF PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCES

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“Today, probably even more than ever before, networks are a key form of social capital for achieving goals in both your professional and personal lives.” Meeting people at conferences “who likely have the same interests as you and are highly relevant to your work” is a good way to nurture and expand your network, says Dorie Clark, author of *Stand Out Networking*.

## Before the Conference

- **Choose Wisely** – Make sure the conference you are attending will address your learning and professional development needs. Not all conferences are equally useful. Talk with students who have attended previous conferences, ask your professors, or talk to others in your field as to the potential usefulness of the conference.
- **Attend the Entire Conference** – Attending a conference for just one day often is not worth the financial cost.
- **Register Early** – There are often significant discounts or scholarships for early registration.
- **Reflect on Your Goals Before You Attend** – You may want to spend some time reflecting on your career goals before attending a conference. Don’t passively attend the conference. Use it to advance your personal, professional, or civic objectives!
- **Read the Conference Materials and Do Some Preliminary Planning Before You Attend** – Spend some time before the conference reading program materials to get a sense of what seems most interesting and relevant. If a list of individuals and/or organizations attending the conference is available in advance, do some research to identify potential people you want to engage in a networking conversation. Taking the time to prepare in advance will help you feel more relaxed and organized once the conference begins.
- **Pay Attention to the “Unofficial Dress Code”** – Conferences tend to be more “dressed up” on the first day and more casual on subsequent days. However, make sure to read the program for clues, such as “Gala Dinner” (bring dress clothes) or “Business Lunch” (bring more business-like clothing). Also, ask others who have attended previous conferences what they wore, or look at pictures of past conferences online to get clues as to acceptable dress.
- **Print Business Cards** – People often share business cards at conferences. You will meet people with whom you will want to network, and it will be easier for them to contact you if you share your business card. Keep them looking professional.
- **Start or Update a Contact Database** – Having a list of people in your network and their contact information will come in handy. Making notes about how you met the person or things you have in common can help you start a later conversation.

## During the Conference

- **Attend the Orientation for New Attendees** – If you have never attended a professional conference before, take advantage of the orientation for new attendees. This will help you understand the conference themes, structure, organization, and opportunities, and attending will help you better navigate the event.
- **Use the Mobile Conference App** – Conference apps are super convenient and efficient ways to navigate a conference.
- **Introduce Yourself** – Conferences are great ways to engage with your familiar and trusted colleagues, but make it a point to expand your network by introducing yourself to at least three new people. Additionally, sit next to different people at each session and at each meal. If you feel awkward approaching others, network with an extroverted friend who can help with introductions. You are likely to meet some amazing people.
- **Focus on Variety** – There is normally a variety of session formats to select from, including pre-conference workshops, panel discussions, team-delivered presentations, and single-presenter presentations. Each offers a unique experience and learning opportunity. Branch out a bit and see if you can sample a range of presentation approaches and styles.
- **Venture into New Territory** – Choose to attend at least one conference presentation in an area with which you are not familiar. This might help you discover a new passion, resource, or opportunity.
- **Use a “Tag Team” Approach to Accessing Concurrent Sessions** – If you know others attending the conference, consider asking your colleagues to spread out over the conference and attend different concurrent sessions. This strategy will ensure maximum exposure to what the conference has to offer. Set some time aside to debrief and share materials and handouts with your friends during breaks. This will help you gain access to much more of the conference than you could as a single attendee.
- **Participate** – Be an active rather than passive participant. Much of the learning that takes place at a conference happens through peer-to-peer sharing and interaction. Ask thoughtful questions at sessions to create dialogue with the presenters and other attendees. You may also wish to consider volunteering at a conference. This can be a great way to gain professional experience and engage more fully in the conference as it is happening. Sometimes you may even receive a discount on related fees if you volunteer.
- **Take Notes and Apply Key Learning to Your Work** – Write down a few key takeaways from each session you attend. Consider how you might use what you learned in your work. Hang on to your handouts for future reference.
- **Attend the Social Events** – Attend the scheduled social events! These are actually a lot of fun and really help to extend the excitement, enthusiasm, and energy of a conference. If you are shy, take a friend with you. Don't be afraid to relax and mingle.

**\*If You Are Presenting** – Presenting at a conference carries with it additional and unique responsibilities. Check in with your CLS adviser and faculty about particularities in your field.

## After the Conference

- **Save Your Original Receipts** – If you received funding from other sources, you may be required to produce original receipts. Also, depending on your tax situation, attendance at professional conferences may be a deductible business expense.
- **Share What You Learned with Others/Bring Conference Highlights Home** – Consider yourself an emissary and share what you learned with others. Bring conference highlights home by presenting to others in your community and sharing key takeaways.
- **Follow Up** – Use the business cards you collect at a conference in the future. Reach out to others and look for ways to share and collaborate on new projects. This is a great way to form and strengthen professional networks over time. Within a week of the conference, send a personal note to those with whom you wish to stay in contact or connect with them via LinkedIn.
- **Hang onto Your Conference Program** – Conference programs, even in digital form, can be great professional resources and often include an attendee list. They are literally directories of expert-level knowledge and subject-matter expertise and can be accessed for a wide range of reasons following a conference. Perhaps you'd like to invite someone to speak at a gathering, act as a mentor, or collaborate on a related project or future proposal? Let your program act as a professional resource and directory going forward.