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PERSONAL FINANCE 9/22/2014 @ 9:22AM | 9,602 views

13 Mistakes Not to Make When Attending a Conference



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In the past year I have attended a half-dozen conferences, and I love them. Over the years I can attribute hundreds of thousands of dollars of revenue to these events.

Professional conferences are an unparalleled opportunity to build your network, get new ideas, deepen connections with your current contacts and clients and get out of the office and shake things up. I'm not the only one digging conferences— in 2012, the last year for which the Convention Industry Council has figures, 225 million attendees participated in 1.9 million conventions, conferences, congresses, trade shows and exhibitions, incentive events and corporate meetings.

But none of this good stuff happens just because you put on your black pumps and meander around an exhibit hall — which many people do. Here's how to avoid wasting your time and [travel](#) budget and get the most out of a professional conference.

1. Go without a goal. Just because your industry is holding its annual trade fair and all your colleagues are going isn't a good reason to go. Instead, articulate to yourself — on a piece of paper, or aloud to a friend — your goals for going. This might be as straight-forward as getting new clients, brushing up on best practices or recruiting new vendors and partners.
2. Dress like a slob. Just because your boss won't be there doesn't mean it's Ok to wear shorts and a tank top — even if your luggage is lost. This is a professional event. Dress like a professional. Even if your industry uniform is Dockers with a company polo shirt, make sure your is clean,

pressed and your shoes shined. This applies for the plane on the way there and back. I just returned from FinCon in New Orleans where I happened to sit next two two different attendees on the flight down— one of which lead to an on-camera marketing opportunity.

3. Wear awesome, but uncomfortable clothes. Any event is better if you are in a great, energetic mood. This will not be the case if your feet are throbbing with blisters inside your Badgley Mischka platform stilettos and the rest of you screaming for release from the way-too-small Spanx. Look sharp — but comfortable.
4. Be gross. This means getting too drunk too late, eating too much free, salty and carb-y food, blanking on your exercise routine and otherwise not taking care of your physical self. Travel and being “on” for days on end requires super-human energy and focus. Do what you can to maintain yours.
5. Don’t plan ahead. Every conference and trade show posts its agenda online ahead of time. Many now have cool interactive apps to help you schedule your time there. But that is just the beginning.
6. Only attend the scheduled events. Once you have the skeleton agenda mapped out, ask around in your network who plans to attend the show and set up meetings. When others know you’re attending you may be surprised to find yourself invited to private events, referred to other helpful people and asked to take on leadership roles in related functions.
7. Don’t take full advantage of offerings. Many conferences offer mentor/mentee programs during the event, as well as volunteer or social gatherings around the core activities. These are often small and casual events that create great opportunities to meet new people and grow.
8. Avoid leadership opportunities. I find that many people don’t even consider seeking out speaking opportunities. Conference organizers are often eager to recruit new panelists and organizers. Further, panelists and other leaders are usually profiled and promoted in pre-event marketing which significantly increases your profile and opens other doors. But you have to ask. Just email the conference organizer and ask.
9. Believe you’re too cool for an elevator pitch. In all these conferences I’ve attended it stuns me how often I meet someone new who has also been meeting dozens of people throughout the event and still cannot spit out their self-introduction and current objective in less than a rambling 10 minutes. Get it down to 45 seconds. This is so important. Write it out. Practice it with a professional friend. Get this down. Otherwise you come off as unfocused and lost.
10. Be nervous and closed off. Being friendly and open is one of the best set of professional tools I’ve developed. I’ll talk to anyone – I could care less who you are. The keynote speaker? We’re chatting at the post-event cocktails. The college student who timidly approaches me after the panel? They have my card and an invite to call the next week. I have found so many opportunities and professional friendships just by being nice and outgoing.

11. Be rigid in your goals and method. [Serendipity is the special sauce of success.](#) Yes, establish goals and an agenda. Work the joint like crazy. But at every booth, cocktail party and one-on-one, be open to your plans for the event and career being tossed aside. Take meetings with people who seem at first introduction to be outside of your core objectives. Attend a session that you think has nothing to do with your job title. Because if you are taking full advantage of the event, you will upturn new ideas and meet new people who can change your life. In other words: Don't get in your own way.
12. Let all those business cards you collected sit on your desk until you throw them away before next year's show. Wait until most attendees will have been back in the office for two days and send a personal email following up. The email should include a brief summary of who you are, what you discussed and suggest next steps for moving towards the next step: setting up a meeting, enrolling them in your program, referring them to your sales team or connecting with their boss.
13. Dread it. As I said, conferences require a ton of energy — even for outgoing social people like me. Between clearing your calendar, travel, pre-work and navigating the masses of meetings, people and obligations, these events can easily turn into a massive drag. But they can also be a ton of fun, especially if you're doing good business and making money.

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