



Career Corner

A Guide to Conferences

By Erin Fallon

erin@altaassociates.com


Whether you are a techie, hungry to learn about new technology, an evangelist eager to spread the word, or an executive interested in investing in a new product/service, the central focus in attending a conference is to meet credible contacts in the field. Networking is a wonderful way to link to all the different aggregates that exist within a particular field. You build professional bridges so that you have a holistic and credible network. To optimize your networking skills at a conference, I have a few suggestions...

1. **Be prepared.** Have an action plan before you attend an event so you can go in with confidence and purpose. There are entirely too many people at these events to give our personal attention to each one. This means that you really have to have an action plan to be effective. For example, if you want to make new contacts in a specialized area, then position yourself at speaking events centered around the topic and capitalize on break sessions. That being said, it's hard to make time for all the people you want to meet within short breaking sessions, so commit to memory those faces in the room that most interest you, or better yet, write down names/identifying characteristics or features that will enable you to point them out in a different setting. Always take the time to introduce yourself and compliment and exchange business cards with the speaker if you are impressed with his or her knowledge and delivery.
2. **Be sincere.** Upon meeting a new contact at a conference, make a credible and genuine human link. Commit to learning something about that person, giving them your undivided attention. Avoid scoping the room for the next connection you would like to make, as this kind of behavior will surely be conveyed as insincere and ultimately is not the foundation for a strong trust-based relationship. Be sure to start off on the right foot by giving the other person the same respect you would want for yourself. If this means positioning yourself so that your back is to the crowd while having an initial conversation with someone, then do so! This is much better than the obligatory head nodding and perpetuating a conversation with wandering eyes.
3. **Be strategic.** This is the quality vs. quantity dichotomy at networking events. I think as you gain more experience attending conferences and other networking events, this becomes almost natural. For people just starting out, it is important to understand how to "work the room." On one hand, you don't want to talk to one person or the same folks the entire night; on the other hand, you don't want to have a superficial conversation with everyone in the room in order to

hand your card out to as many people as possible. Stay away from the two extremes, and find your networking niche somewhere in the middle. Make the most of your time by gaining as many quality contacts as you can.

4. **Follow up.** "Follow up or fail"—this is the most important part of networking. Most people have every intention of following up once they are back to the office—sending out e-mails, making phone calls, and setting up meetings—yet fail to do so. We all have to catch up on work once we get back into the swing of things and sometimes get overwhelmed and forget to follow up. From a business perspective, this is cost- and time-ineffective and ultimately results in no ROI. All of your networking efforts become fruitless if you don't follow up after conferences.
5. **Make appointments.** During the follow-up process, be sure to set specific appointments and/meetings to continue developing the relationship and be sure to finalize them. Capitalize on these opportunities by inviting others to attend who would benefit from the meeting. Inviting other trusted colleagues and friends shows that you respect the person(s) with whom you are meeting and they will surely appreciate the connection and be more apt to return the favor in the future. Learn to be a "connector" and your network will grow infinitely.

Conclusion

As Keith Ferazzi, author of *Never Eat Alone*, puts it, "Relationships are like muscles, the more you use them, the stronger they become." Put forth the effort and you will surely see results. Do your research and identify those whom you wish to connect with, create a strong foundation from which to build upon, maintain trust-based relationships, and invite more and more people into your network who give you the same respect. Over time, you will have a mutually beneficial network from which to grow and succeed. 

Erin Fallon is an executive recruiter with Alta Associates.