

Making the Most of Industry Conferences

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Conference season is here. Some of the largest strategic planning and competitive intelligence industry conferences will take place or have recently occurred, including annual conferences for the Association for Strategic Planning (February 22-24, Pasadena CA), the Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals (March 9-12, Washington DC), and the Special Libraries Association (June 13-16, New Orleans LA).

One of the cardinal rules that many conference attendees violate is leaving a conference without making meaningful connections with people that they did not know before attending the conference. Doing so can result in valuable networking and referrals that can improve your company's competitive intelligence and strategic planning capabilities. This month, we outline seven simple steps to ensure that you maximize relationships established while attending a conference.

1. *Take advantage of pre- and post-conference workshops.* Most conferences offer workshops and other special events, usually outside of the normal conference program. Workshop presenters are leaders in the industry as participants are required to pay an additional fee to attend these sessions. Take advantage of these workshops, and introduce yourself to the speakers. Doing so helps you build a relationship you can leverage in the future.
2. *Seek out new industry contacts.* One of the most valuable outcomes of a strategy or CI conference is the learning that takes place outside the sessions. Try to meet others from your industry and learn how they handle business problems that your company is facing. Use your current business problem as an "ice breaker" to start a conversation. Take particular interest in their knowledge, and ask for resource referrals, such as industry contacts, book authors, etc.
3. *Talk to people sitting next to you at conference sessions.* Conference participants can feel that they must find specific formal opportunities to network. But how often do you speak with the person sitting next to you during a session, at lunch, etc.? Doing so can offer

networking opportunities that might not otherwise have been discovered.

4. *Don't be tethered to your PDA.* While staying connected is important, don't let your Blackberry, iPhone or other device prevent you from fully taking advantage of the conference. If you are engaged in conversations, make sure that your phone is set to a non-audible tone or to vibrate. Refrain from checking your email or taking a call during networking events. These actions are not only rude, but they can crush first impressions.
5. *Arrive at receptions early.* Most conferences offer evening cocktail receptions. Arriving early at receptions can help you make more connections. Conference participants usually congregate in small groups at these receptions. Arriving late can make it hard to find an "in" with a particular group. People tend to migrate towards people who are already in the room, and if you arrive early, it's likely that a group will form around you.
6. *Connect with people after hours.* The most valuable connections can be the ones made off the conference floor. If there is someone you especially want to connect with, offer to meet with them either before or after formal conference events. Arrange for a breakfast chat or pre-dinner drinks. In this relaxed setting, participants are more likely to speak in depth about their company, their services, or their business issues.
7. *Leverage social networking tools like LinkedIn.* A great way to stay connected with new contacts is with LinkedIn. Make sure to get permission to connect before you reach out to someone on LinkedIn. Once connected, assess whether any of your current connections would benefit from being referred to the people you just met. Your new connections will not only appreciate the follow-up, but they will also value your help in expanding their network.

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