



Ten Tips for Conference Connections

by Robbie Samuels, Professional Speaker | Podcast Host | Coach

In an age where information is found with one click, and we count “likes” as engagement, conferences hold the promise of meaningful in-person connection with like-minded colleagues. Only through thoughtful and strategic planning will this promise become a reality. Put these ten tips into practice to create conference connections!

1) Set Personal Networking Goals

Set goals for how many people you want to meet and how many you want to reconnect with at the conference. You need to be doing both. If you only collect new business cards, you’re not deepening your connection with the people you already have met. If you only speak to people you know, you are missing out on one of the great benefits of conferences - expanding your professional network.

Introverts may find that having goals helps them keep mingling even though they find it tiring. Extroverts may already be great at mingling, but setting personal goals ensures they are having meaningful connections and not just having quick handshakes and hugs with everyone they see.

2) Draft Follow-up Email Ahead of Time

There is a difference between collecting business cards and building relationships. One tip to get you focused on the networking possibilities at an event is to write a draft of your follow-up email ahead of time. Doing this will help you get clear on who you would ideally meet, what you would want them to know about you, and how you would like to stay in touch. This also increases the likelihood that you’ll actually send a follow-up message.

3) What do you do?

Inevitably you’ll be asked, “What do you do?” Rather than saying your job title, try to answer the question using this syntax: “I help ____ do ____.” Another example is “I inspire ____ to do ____.” Jot down a few different variations until you find one that works for you and then brainstorm a couple of quick stories you could share that illustrate your work and its impact on the world. With this pre-planning done you’ll feel a lot more confident interacting with other attendees.

4) Business Cards

Even in the age of smartphones and apps, business cards are a critical tool for networking. Make sure you have them with you (not in your luggage in your room). You’re likely going to receive lots of business cards. Accept them from everyone who offers, but keep track of the ones that you want to prioritize. One way to do that is to turn the corners on those cards and write notes on the back of them. (Be aware that in some Asian cultures this is an offensive action. It’s important to learn cultural norms if you do business internationally.)

Remember, while business cards are important, they are not the point of networking. Consider them a means to an end – the goal being building a supportive network based on strong relationships. Combine this tip with the one about drafting your follow-up email in advance, and you'll be able to send follow-up messages with ease.

5) Open Body Language (Croissants vs. Bagels)

Avoid standing in a closed and difficult to break into huddle (aka bagel) unless you absolutely don't want anyone to interrupt your conversation. Even if you are standing with just one other person, you can create a croissant, an opening for others to join you. Being approachable will make it easy for you to invite anyone passing by to join your conversation (and it's far easier to leave a conversation when in a group).



This is not a wide stance. Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, one leg back a bit, with weight on your back leg, and torso turned slightly toward whichever foot is in back – either towards two or ten o'clock.

6) Avoid Curious Questions

Before uttering the first thought that comes into your head when meeting someone, check first to be sure you're not asking merely out of curiosity. That usually means you've noticed something different about the person in front of you and you're about to hone in on that difference by asking about it. Since that likely happens to this person all day, every day, they'll give you a pat answer that likely won't lead to further discussion. You won't make a great or long-lasting impression, and you'll miss the opportunity to engage with them in a genuine way. A true compliment is about something they chose.

7) Say hello!

Arrive a few minutes early for your next breakout session and resist the temptation to sit as far as possible from other early arrivals. Think about this for a moment. Out of a conference with thousands of attendees, the people in this session chose the same topic as you. These are the people you want to meet. Put your phone away and turn to the person sitting closest to you. Say, "Hi, my name is..." and ask what drew them to this session.

8) Raise your hand!

Don't let being shy and/or introverted hold you back from sharing an observation or question during Q&A. Get the floor and ask your question, and end by saying "I would love to chat with folks who are thinking about these issues. Find me at the end of this session." Then stick around at the end of the session and make eye contact with folks as they are leaving.

Someone may come up to you right then or a little while later during lunch, and start a conversation about the topic you raised. Since you're more comfortable in a one-on-one conversation, this is ideal for you. But it's only possible if people know what you're about - you need to raise your hand.

9) Work the line

At the end of the breakout session, chat with attendees who had lined up to speak with the presenter (whom you already said hello to before the session began).

Chatting with attendees waiting in line increases the likelihood that you'll walk out of the session in a conversation and avoid having to figure out how to break into those tight bagels once back in the vibrant chaos of the conference hallway. Paying attention to small networking moments like this will help you meet the kind of people you want to know - attendees with the same interests as you and a willingness to engage.

10) Don't sit with colleagues

Too often, people from the same organization sit together whenever possible, reducing the possibility that they will meet their peers from different organizations. You can catch up with your co-workers at home, at the conference take advantage of the networking opportunities in front of you.

10a) Lanyards – navel gazing

And, let me throw in a quick note here about nametags. Too often, nametags at conferences are hanging closer to one's navel than their lapel. So during the "networking luncheon" everyone's nametag is hidden below the table. During the networking break in the hall, you need to look down at someone's navel while shaking their hands – making it harder to bluff that you remembered their name all along.

While convenient because they work with any outfit, lanyards are the cause of all this navel gazing. I suggest you tie up some of the lanyard to lift your nametag higher.

BONUS 11) Tweet!

Standing out at a conference doesn't always require standing in the front of the room or taking on a volunteer role. You can also stand out by actively tweeting throughout the event. Even if you're not active on Twitter the rest of the year, you can use this tool to connect with fellow attendees and become known by the organizers.

You never know unless you say hello.

Bottom line, conferences are about more than content. They are about building your professional network by making new connections.

Robbie Samuels has been recognized as a networking expert by *Inc.* and *Lifehacker*, and profiled in *Stand Out: How to Find Your Breakthrough Idea and Build a Following Around It*. Since 2009, his engaging and fun presentations have helped a wide array of audiences increase their confidence when it comes to relationship building – whether through networking, fundraising, or sales. He passionately believes everyone should stop wasting time networking and shares how in his signature session "Art of the Schmooze." Listen to his podcast *On the Schmooze* for more networking tips: www.OntheSchmooze.com.