

How to Make the Most of Conferences |

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Throughout my career, long before planning events for IMA, I've been involved with all types of conferences from large, week-long, city-wide conventions to small, one-day meetings that were more intimate and focused. At any type of function, however, people ask

the same important question: "How do I make the most out of this event?" The bottom line is that attending a conference is an investment of your or your organization's time and money. Conferences will differ in their purpose, format, and agenda, but there are several ways to get the most value from them.

Conferences present a unique opportunity to have direct access to and interaction with professionals with diverse backgrounds who share a common interest with you. IMA's Annual Conference and Exposition, for example, draws professionals from corporations of all sizes, non-profit organizations, government, and educational institutions. It's an ideal opportunity for you to mingle with hundreds of colleagues who speak your professional language and to expand your pool of resources and contacts. Imagine how many casual introductions can turn into long-

lasting professional relationships that become mutually supportive and beneficial for everyone involved. Just remember to bring plenty of business cards. (As a rule of thumb, bring three times the amount that you think you'll need. It's better to bring them home than to run out.)

Prepare Before You Go

Before the conference, take some time to think about why you are attending. Consider what you hope to learn or whom you'd like to meet while you're there. Review the educational sessions, and think about them in the context of your responsibilities at work as well as your career goals. Are there topics that you need to learn more about, or are there sessions that will help you hone your skills? Are you going to the conference to see products or services on the show floor that will help you solve a business problem?

Make your list, and pack it as the first item in your suitcase.

On-site, after you've picked up your registration materials, review the final conference program. This is your guide to making the most of the event. A final program typically will list the conference sessions and their locations, dates, and times, along with the speakers' names and affiliations. Determine your schedule, and begin to think about what you hope to take away from the sessions. Use the floorplan of the meeting facility to figure out where events will take place, and remember to arrive at a session 10 minutes early in order to get a seat and a copy of the handouts. Review the exhibitor listing and floorplan to decide which companies you need to see and how much time you need to allow. Combine this with your list of sessions to determine your schedule.

Ask Questions

The single most important factor in getting the most from your conference experience is to participate and to be inquisitive (or be curious). Some people are more social than others, and mingling and meeting new people come easily for them. For

the introverts out there (speaking as one myself), the good news is that there's a common professional connection among all conference participants, so the fear of having nothing to say to someone doesn't exist. Even a simple question of "Who do you work for?" or "What do you do at your job?" can be the start of a great professional relationship.

Don't limit yourself to only attending sessions. Become an active participant in all official conference activities, such as orientations, end-of-the-day receptions, the annual meeting (if the organization holds one during the conference), and question-and-answer sessions. While attending educational sessions, ask questions to gain a deeper understanding of the topic being presented. Others may want to ask a question but are too reserved to ask on their own. You can be the icebreaker. Sometimes the best learning and networking experiences come from the unscripted part of a session.

Good conferences have speakers with a variety of business experiences that include innovations, successes, and triumphs over adversity. They've been selected based on their real-world experiences and are there to share their solutions so you don't repeat the same kinds of mistakes. IMA's conference speakers share best practices, research findings, and career development tips among other topics in the management accounting field. Take advantage of this enormous wealth of knowledge. Questions encourage a speaker to go beyond scripted notes and delve deeper into a topic they are excited about.

A great tip when attending educational sessions is to dedicate one sheet of paper to listing the ideas and tips that you will want to implement the minute you get home. Also create a

list of names and phone numbers of people you will want to contact after the conference. Keep this list handy throughout the year and *use* it.

Make Time to Make Connections

In addition to speakers, you can mingle with senior executives or those who have a job similar to yours or who work for an organization that you may be interested in learning more about. This is especially true with professional societies such as IMA where members are located throughout the world.

Another very effective conference networking opportunity is a "brown bag" lunch, which allows attendees to create their own working lunch by selecting relevant topics of discussion and meeting in small groups. This has become a popular tradition at IMA's conference. In fact, in 2006, more than 60 topics—ranging from Lean Accounting to ethics—were discussed during lunch in a friendly, casual, interactive manner.

At a minimum, a brown bag lunch can satisfy two goals: At the end of the event, you've exchanged ideas and shared solutions (or commiserated), and you should walk away with at least nine business cards from a group with whom you share a common interest.

Visit the Exhibit Hall

Now that you're networking and participating, there's one last key factor necessary for making the most of your conference experience. Many conferences have an exhibition that showcases products and services and allows attendees to get hands-on experience by talking directly to vendors. The best way to approach an exhibit hall is to envision the space as a "learning laboratory" where "please touch" is encouraged. IMA calls its

exhibit hall the Solutions Showcase to help attendees find products and services that will solve their daily business challenges. You've heard the theory, best practices, and solutions in the sessions; now see the means to achieve those ends through the products and services on the show floor. E-mail and the Internet are irreplaceable for doing business, but face-to-face interaction can't be beat for gathering information and learning about new tools.

Vendors are there to make sales, but the means to that end is to professionally educate you on their products and services and their specific solution-enablement capabilities. Even if you aren't in the market for any of these or aren't directly responsible for making that decision (you're an "influencer" vs. a decision maker), take a moment to learn what's new. Everyone has some level of influence where they work. One way to show your company what you gained from attending the conference is by demonstrating exactly what you learned. Contributing to the success of your company by reporting back valuable advice and insights is a surefire way to be selected to attend conferences in the future.

When you return from your conference, take a few hours to do your expense report, organize the business cards you've collected, review your list of great ideas, and make copies of and distribute any handouts or meeting materials beneficial to your peers. Consider sending a brief report to your boss or your company president, outlining the benefits of your participation and showing that the company's funds were well worth the investment. Realizing the hidden value of conferences and making the most out of your investment can benefit you throughout your career. ■