

## Are You Getting the Most Out of Attending Legal Conferences?

By Paramjit L. Mahli

Attending conferences can be a hugely costly venture, particularly if travel is involved. Let's face it, conferences are exhausting and demanding emotionally, and they take you away from billable hours and clients. Finally, unless you are traveling first class, there are the usual post-September-11 travel headaches. All of which sometimes makes us question whether conferences are even worth attending. Fortunately, with a bit of elbow grease, conferences can provide a huge opportunity to build relationships with prospects and professional peers. Done well, conferences help take relationships to the next level and provide a multitude of networking opportunities.

Here's a checklist of things to do before attending a conference:

- Business cards — make sure you have enough. If you are running low, order them in advance. You need to take extra cards, because guaranteed there will always be other attendees who have forgotten them. So put your best foot forward.
- Get one of your associates to find out how many people will be attending and whether or not you can get a list of the attendees beforehand (not always possible, but always worth a try). By getting your associate to carry this out, you are doing double duty, as the associate is learning a business development activity and helping the senior attorney make certain they leverage all their opportunities.
- If the organizers *do* provide you with a list of attendees, highlight it with a bright, fluorescent highlighter so that it sticks out like a sore thumb when you review conference materials. Don't forget to highlight all the sessions you want to attend and the speakers that you want to connect with.
- Have a camera with you, particularly if it is an international conference. Undoubtedly photographs will be taken, and this is a great opportunity to have extra copies made and sent to other attendees that you meet. They will certainly remember you. If you do email them, remember to include your contact details.

These are some of the very basic things attorneys need to do beforehand in order to maximize the return on investment of the firm's dollars and time.

Once you are at the conference itself, here are some more pointers to remember:

- Arrive early for all sessions. This will provide you with ample opportunities to speak to speakers and other attendees and plan where you will sit.
- Try to attend as many of the social events for the conference as possible, especially if they are very near the hotel. At these events, often broken down in small groups, the atmosphere is usually relaxed and informal. They are wonderful for making those critical one-to-one connections.

- During breakfast and lunch times, try to sit with a different group of people, preferably attendees that you don't know. Don't forget that one of your reasons for attending is building your network.
- Become familiar with the coffee spots in the hotel. These are great spots to arrange one-on-one meetings. Have the mindset of a host rather than a guest.
- If you're not one of the speakers, you can still get your fifteen minutes of fame. Ask a thoughtful question during the question-and-answer section. However, don't forget to tell the audience who you are and where you work.
- If you know other attendees from different parts of the country, arrange a breakfast so that you can all connect.



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When you return from a conference, the temptation will inevitably be to delay going through conference material and become immersed in "catching up." Though tempting, what you should instead do upon returning is to block a couple of hours of reviewing and implementation time.

During this time, go through all the conference material: your notes, networking dinners, keynotes, and other activities. Gather all the business cards you received together. Prioritize whom you want to reach out to and allocate a realistic time frame for doing so. Remember, you don't want too much time to pass without reaching out to other attendees.

Ultimately, the success of attending conferences is determined by the timeliness of follow-up.

#### **About the Author**

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