

But all those speakers, sessions, contacts, and conversations can also be overwhelming. Besides bringing boatloads of business cards and [collecting them from other people](#), what else should you be planning on when you have an event coming up? From prepping beforehand to having a great time while you're there, here's what you need to know to make the most of your next conference.

## **Before the Conference**

### **1. Gain Visibility**

A great way to maximize your conference experience is to participate in some way—like [being a presenter](#), session facilitator, or committee volunteer. (When you see the initial posting for the conference, check out if there are these options available, or email the conference organizer directly to ask.) While you're there, you'll be among hundreds or thousands of other participants, but if you can take on a visible role, that's an easy way to set yourself apart from the crowd.

### **2. Build Stronger Relationships**

A conference is the time to meet new people, but it's also a time to build on the relationships you already have. If you know of people you want to reconnect with or get to know better who will be attending—clients, vendors, friends-of-friends—reach out a few weeks before the conference to set up a time to meet for coffee or a meal while you're at the event.

## **At the Conference**

### **3. Get Briefed**

A lot of conferences try to be extra welcoming to newbies and will host a first-timers briefing. You definitely want to build this type of session into your schedule—not only to get the scoop on things, but also to meet other participants who, just like you, [are a little uncertain](#) and looking to form some new relationships.

### **4. Choose the Right Sessions**

At most conferences, there will be an abundance of sessions to choose from—many more than you'll be able to attend! So when you're plotting your schedule, take a look at the conference as a whole. Look at all the sessions and events you're interested in, then make sure you're getting to attend a range of topics, skill-building sessions, and social events, and still allowing for some down time.

And if you find yourself in a session that isn't quite what you thought it was going to be, don't feel bad about skipping out and going to a different one. A conference is all about using your time wisely and getting the most out of all that's there.

### **5. Remember What You Learn**

With days full of speakers and sessions, there's *a lot* to take in—and you're probably not going to remember all of it when you get home. So, collect your notes and information in a way that makes it easy to access when you return to the office. Regardless of your note-taking format of choice (pen and paper, laptop, tablet, smartphone), at the end of each session you attend, write down the three key takeaways and any follow-up you want to do on the topic or with the speakers. This will help jog your memory and give you specific to-dos when you get back to work.

### **6. Connect With the Speakers**

The speakers and panelists at any conference are likely key experts in your field—read: people who you want to know. So don't be afraid to ask questions or hang around (even as the last person) at a session to say hello, tell them you loved the presentation, and grab their business cards. And if you don't get a chance to ask your question in person, you can always follow up by [asking them on Twitter](#).

### **7. Schmooze at the Social Events**

Definitely make time to attend the conference’s social events—they’re a great opportunity to connect with people in a more relaxed setting. (Hint: These events are often more important than the sessions!) And don’t be afraid to linger even the event is over—you don’t want cut off a great conversation with someone just to be on time to your next session.

## 8. Put Away the Smartphone

You may be thinking: “But—I have [so many emails waiting!](#)” or “They told me to tweet about the event!” But here’s the thing: You’re at a conference to have in-person interaction, and you don’t want your electronic devices to be a barrier to making those connections. So while you don’t have to disconnect completely, put the phone away when you’re waiting for a workshop to begin or taking a break at the coffee bar, and give yourself a chance to strike up conversations with the other attendees around you.

## After the Conference

## 9. Friendly Follow-up

At the conference, you were collecting business cards, new Facebook friends, and Twitter followers. Afterward, you it’s time to do something with them. Within a week of returning from the event, send a personal follow-up to everyone you met to let them know you enjoyed meeting them. Also set up a phone call or face-to-face meeting with anyone you specifically want to do business or build a relationship with.

## 10. Pay it Forward

You gained a lot of new information, inspiration, and contacts at the conference, and one of the best things you can do with those resources is to share them with your fellow co-workers, colleagues, and friends. Send out videos of the sessions you thought were particularly valuable, give a talk about something you learned at your next staff meeting, and tell your boss about some of the interesting contacts you met. You’ll spread your new skills and knowledge—and hopefully your colleagues will reciprocate the next time they go to a great event.

Photo courtesy of [University of Exeter](#).



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