

How to Meet People at Conferences

By Norman M. Goldfarb

People go to clinical research conferences, in part, to meet other industry professionals. The contacts made may be more valuable than the information learned. However, "networking" is often easier said than done, especially for people who are not natural party animals. Here are 17 tips for successful networking at clinical research conferences:

- **Choose your conference.** Large meetings have lots of people, but only a small fraction you want to meet. Specialized meetings have few attendees, but you want to meet most of them.
- **Establish your objectives.** How many people do you want to meet? When you leave the meeting, what relationship do you want to have with them? Do you want to make new acquaintances or renew old ones?
- **Identify your target audience.** Are you looking for potential customers, suppliers, employers, employees, advisors, kindred spirits, or people with their own networks of contacts? Are the people you are targeting employed by pharmaceutical companies, academic sites, or government agencies? Are they project managers, study coordinators, or executives?
- **Put your game head on.** Most people at conferences are hoping against hope that someone, anyone, will acknowledge their existence. They desperately cling to a colleague – or the first person they meet – to avoid the possibility of rejection. They want to be your friend, but are just too terrified to ask. Show some kindness and introduce yourself. At worst, you will gain experience and the confidence that you are not like them. You don't have to enjoy it, but it will probably be less painful than you expect. If networking doesn't come naturally, just grit your teeth and do it; you have nothing to lose but your desolate solitude in a world with over six billion people.
- **Fly solo.** If your objective is networking, do not fraternize more than necessary with people who are already in your network, unless they can introduce you to someone you want to meet.
- **Identify yourself.** Wear your name badge prominently. Make it easy for people to find you by wearing clothing that is a bit distinctive. ("Joe? He's over there with the rubber chicken on his head.") Take the initiative in introducing yourself. Unless you interrupt when someone is talking, people are happy to meet you, or at least go through the pleasantries.
- **Manage your time.** If you meet a good contact, spend enough time to begin the relationship, and then move on. If you are sure someone is completely useless to you, excuse yourself and move on. Say something like "It was very nice to meet you. The space aliens are after me, so I better keep moving."
- **Go where people are easy to meet.** It's relatively easy to meet people who are the people sitting next to you at a session, people at lunch tables, people in groups when you know someone in the group, and people who are alone.
- **Go where your targets go.** You increase your odds if you spend time in your targets' natural habitats. Regulatory specialists are relatively likely to attend

sessions on regulatory topics. Sponsor personnel are relatively likely to be in the vicinity of CRO exhibit booths.

- **Talk to people in exhibit booths.** People in exhibit booths are paid to talk to you. They have to be polite; they even have to show interest. While you are there, meet other people visiting the booth.
- **Keep an open mind.** Only a small fraction of the people you are likely to meet at a big conference will fit your target profiles. But many of the others may know those people or help you accomplish your objectives in other ways.
- **Meet popular people.** Merely by standing next to popular people, you can meet more people.
- **Trade business cards.** Offer your card and ask for one in return. Not everyone will volunteer their card. Write a brief note on the back to help you remember who they are and why you care. If they don't have a card, give them one of yours and a pen so they can create one on the spot; make sure it's legible and includes their telephone number and email address.
- **Ask good questions; provide good answers.** Be prepared to tell people something useful or interesting, e.g., recent news reports, what you learned at previous sessions, or where the parties are. Prepare suitable questions for your target audience. Ask for help or advice; most people love giving it, so you are only being kind.
- **Work the Big Room.** If you are one of only two people in a room, it is common courtesy to introduce yourself. Above some threshold number (that is different for each person), introducing yourself feels very awkward. In a big room, focus on follow-up conversations with people you met previously. To make new contacts, conducting an informal survey will give you an excuse to walk up to people.
- **Measure your results.** Count the business cards you collected. Then count the ones that appear to matter to you. Track your performance from meeting to meeting.
- **Follow-up.** Obtain cell phone numbers so you can talk with the best contacts again during the same meeting. After the meeting, send emails to the good contacts, preferably containing information that they may find useful or interesting.

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