



Maximizing Your Conference Experience: **An 8-Step Checklist**



Get the Most Out of Your Next Conference

As you put your plan and schedule together for this year's conference season, you should also start thinking about how to ensure you and your team get the most from the events you attend. After all, the conferences you choose will only be as educational, inspiring, and impactful as you make them. To help, we've put together this 8-step checklist to help you maximize your conference experience.



1

Prioritize Your Goals

Every conference is different. To get the most value from the events your team attends, you should have very specific goals.

The easiest way to do this is to assign SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic & time-based) goals for speakers, sessions, and networking. By establishing objective criteria upfront, you'll make better decisions on how you'll invest your time at the event.

Define these same types of goals for breakout sessions, networking opportunities, and time spent assessing vendors on the exhibit floor.

With these goals in mind, you'll now be able to dig into the agendas for each conference and choose where and how you will engage.


2

Identify Top Speakers & Sessions

Let's face it. It's impossible to see and do everything available at most conferences – especially the big national events. You need to be selective.

Review agendas with a critical eye. You can quickly eliminate sessions, panels, and speakers that, while interesting, don't align with your pre-determined goals. Likewise, not every networking event will line up with your particular objectives.

Once you are left with a list of appropriate, on-target items, it's time to prioritize. You'll find the 80/20 rule applies to conferences. Try to identify those 20% activities that will drive the most value, and then make those your top priority.



3

Build an Attendance Matrix

Once you've selected the activities and sessions you want to attend, it's time to lay out a formal schedule.

This is more than just circling items in the show guide. Your attendance matrix needs to include when various activities will occur, where they are located, and what credentials are needed. Here is when you assess whether your current plan is realistic and attainable.

If you are going with a team, the attendance matrix becomes especially useful. You can divide and conquer, maximizing sessions, speakers, and workshops while coordinating collective meals and breaks (an ideal time to share learnings while they're still fresh).

4

Prepare Written Expectations for Each Activity

Once you've determined which sessions and panels you'd like to attend, it's time to prepare your expectations for each activity.

This exercise will help you determine what you want to take away from speakers and panelists. You'll be mentally aligned

for the context and the topic, which will make you a more receptive listener. Likewise, you'll be ready to ask questions that are pertinent to you and your company.



5

Do More Than Just Listen

The speakers at sessions, panels, and workshops are much more accessible than most people expect, making them a wonderful resource beyond the content of their prepared presentations.

Check out speaker bios and look for relevant experiences beyond just the topic at hand. As you develop your written expectations, prepare other subjects and questions you'd like to explore with these various experts.

During the session, don't be afraid to ask questions. By clarifying key points with the speakers (and other participants), you'll help solidify your understanding of the tools and concepts they are striving to share.

After the session, engage in conversation with these experts. Ask the additional off-topic questions you've prepared. Request materials, references, and other resources. Speakers are a wealth of information that the smartest conference attendees should take full advantage of.

6

Make a Networking Plan

As the old saying goes, if we fail to plan, we plan to fail. This is especially true when it comes to networking. Just showing up in a crowded room is not networking. Connecting to like-minded individuals, sharing experiences and challenges and insights – this is what it's really about.

So, just as you prepared for your sessions, you should prepare to network. Are there specific people you'd like to connect with? Are there vendors you've been meaning to learn more about?

Identify these questions and goals and keep them top-of-mind as you attend various networking events. They'll lend direction and momentum to your conversations, and they will help you move from introduction to introduction with purpose and intention.

Finally, don't forget to bring business cards! Make it easy to follow up with new connections by exchanging business cards throughout networking events and the conference.



7

Build Out Your Social Strategy

Conferences are tremendous hot spots for social activity. Plan ahead of time for the types of information you'll share, the platforms you'll leverage (LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.), keywords and hashtags, and any special activities (like a Facebook Live broadcast from the expo floor).

Check to see if your conference has a mobile app. Conference-run mobile apps are a great way to stay connected with other conference attendees, share your experiences and gain access to the conference agenda and speaker materials.

8

Measure Your ROI

Determining the ROI of a conference can be challenging, but it is an important activity, especially if your organization participates in a variety of events. It will help justify attendance budgets, and also help you choose which shows make the most sense.

A typical ROI formula will compare total costs with delivered value. Total costs will include direct costs (registration, travel, lodging, meals, etc.) and indirect costs (value of time spent preparing and attending the event, etc.).

Delivered value will be much more difficult to pin down. The best approach is to go back to the SMART targets you identified in step one and to assign a monetary value to each.

Many of these will certainly be judgment calls, but don't worry too much about true numerical objectivity. Even if the ROI gauge is not exactly accurate, you'll have a consistent measurement of value that you can use to assess the relative merits of one conference versus another.



Conclusion

We hope you find this Conference Experience checklist useful.

We look forward to seeing you at one of the many local, regional and national conferences we attend and support:

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