



The Power of Events

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It feels incredibly rare in this Facebook world to make time for the kinds of connections that are only possible at conferences.

Think for a moment about the last conference you attended. You managed your way through all of the logistics to get there. You bought a ticket to the event, figured out whether you were flying or driving, booked a hotel room, and likely even put an away message on your work email and work voicemail. Right?

But did you prepare, so you'll get the most out of the experience?

First and foremost, attending conferences is an investment in your self. It's clear you are serious about getting ahead in your career and making great connections in your field because you've already invested in yourself by attending this event.

Yes, you are taking precious time away from work—and home—and sometimes the cost to attend these kinds of events will come out of your pocket. So, you will want to make a significant return on your investment.

Just think about it for a moment. Learning opportunities are everywhere you look these days: blogs, podcasts, webinars, YouTube, and just by scrolling through Twitter. You might be wondering then, why you or anyone else would spend considerable time, money and effort leaving the comfort of your usual routine to attend a conference.

It's true, content is everywhere, but none of the virtual methods of consuming content can match the benefits of an in-person event.

The best conferences will challenge you personally and professionally. You'll come home re-energized and full of new ideas. Takeaways could include learning new skills, being reminded of best practices, the serendipity of discovering a great new app, or learning a new way of solving an old problem.

While you could learn new skills online, you will be more open to new ideas when you're out of your usual day-to-day spaces. You've experienced this when your staff held an off-site meeting or retreat. Being in a new space gets you out of your rut and open to new experiences, leading to more takeaways to help you grow your career or business.

And of course, conferences are about networking. Meet the people, whose work inspires you, meet your competition, meet people to be in a mastermind group with or to join your personal board of directors—this is what's possible if you attend a conference.

Most people are not natural networkers, and going to large events will likely be outside your comfort zone. You understand the importance of networking at these kinds of events, but you haven't always felt like you make the most of these opportunities. You may even think they are

a waste of your time and you would be more productive staying home instead of leaving the office for a few days to attend a conference.

Year after year you attend many events, conferences, and conventions. You collect dozens of business cards at each of these events and bring them back to your office with good intentions. You place these business cards next to your keyboard and later in the week you move them, adding them to the pile you already have in the back corner of your desk.

In a few months, you decide it's time for spring-cleaning because you notice all these business cards have now spilled over—so you neatly stack them and put them in a drawer. A year later you find them in your drawer; you're not able to remember where they were from or what follow-up you had done or planned to do, so you recycle them. And then you head right back out to another event and start this exhausting cycle all over again.

There is a difference between collecting business cards and building relationships.

In an age where information is one click away, and we count “likes” as engagement, conferences hold the promise of meaningful in-person connections with like-minded colleagues.

There is a common barrier you may be experiencing when you start to think about meeting your fellow participants. There was even [a study done by Harvard](#) that confirmed what you already know - people feel dirty when they think about networking.

It's true, the kind of networking that is transactional leads to that icky feeling that is all too familiar. But that wasn't true for the people who went into the event prepared to give, ready to make connections, share resources, and offer support.

Those people were focused on building relationships, and that meant they were not interested in transactional exchanges and were more open to the possibilities in the room. They didn't feel icky about what they were doing.

Building relationships and making strong connections happen with much greater ease at an in-person event than through any virtual means.

No superhighway, no matter how vast and sophisticated, will ever replace the art of the schmooze.

What can be accomplished in an engaging 10-minute conversation at an event would take months of liking, commenting, and sharing online even to begin to build that kind of rapport.

Ideally, you'd have thought through a strategic networking plan before going to the conference, but even without one, you can take advantage of all the small networking moments throughout the day.

For instance, breakout sessions are an excellent opportunity to meet fellow participants, but one that many do not take advantage.

If it was your first time at the event, you attended solo, or you are shy and/or introverted you may have decided to go to the first breakout session room five or even ten minutes before the program began. That makes sense since you don't know many people at the conference and you don't enjoy mingling in the vibrant chaos of the hallway.

Let me guess what happened next... you chose a chair as far apart as possible from everyone else in the room, taking the aisle seat in the last row if it was still available. Then, quickly got on your phone to check work emails, scroll through Facebook, or play the latest Facebook game craze.

As the room filled up a few people sat near you—perhaps even one seat over. The room was less than half filled and almost entirely silent. You and almost everyone else was focused on their phones.

Even if you are not the most gregarious person, you can take advantage of these small networking moments. After all, the people around you chose the same session as you AND ducked into the session early to avoid the chaos in the hallway, so you likely have something in common with them.

You will have a much better opportunity for a great connection meeting participants in this room, compared to meeting someone randomly in line at the Starbucks in the hotel lobby.

**Keep this mantra in mind:
Here with colleagues? Go mingle. Here alone? Don't stay that way.**

Make the most of the event. Don't use your cell phone as a crutch when you're surrounded by amazing people who have shared interests and have also made it all the way out of their comfort zone to attend the event.

Invest in yourself. Meet your fellow participants. Make great connections. That is the power of events.

Robbie Samuels has been recognized as a “networking expert” by *Inc.* and *Lifehacker*, and is the author of the best-selling business book *Croissants vs. Bagels: Strategic, Effective, and Inclusive Networking at Conferences* available at www.CroissantsvsBagels.com. A professional member of the National Speakers Association, he has been speaking on the topic of inclusive and engaging connections for over a decade. He works with meeting professionals and conference organizers to design experiences that engage all participants, especially first-timers and those attending solo. Learn more about Art of the Schmooze, his signature talk, at www.ArtoftheSchmooze.com.

As a consultant, coach, author, and speaker he shares how to shift your mindset around relationship building, so you discover new connections and business opportunities in the world around you – and know how to act on them. Listen to On the Schmooze podcast for more networking tips from Robbie and interviews with talented leaders: www.OntheSchmooze.com. Learn more about Robbie and his work at www.RobbieSamuels.com. Want content you can share with your event participants? Download “Ten Tips for Conference Connections” at www.RobbieSamuels.com/MPI.