

Attending a Legal Conference, Versus Working One

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There is a plethora of professional conferences held annually that are attended by hundreds of thousands of attorneys. These events can be time consuming, expensive, and in the end net little to no actual, new business for attendees. Considering all those factors, it seems to defy logic that anyone still goes. But just as is the case with any business-building platform, there are ways to improve your odds that things will go your way.

The best-prepared participants may realize the value to most conferences occurs when meeting qualified decision makers and referral partners. Devising a plan to be added to the agenda as a presenter, to obtain an attendee list in advance, and making a point of scheduling coffee meetings with prospective attendees prior to the conference are a few of the insider tips on which this chapter focuses. With a well-thought-out plan in advance, you can change the ho-hum conference experiences in your past to a fertile ground for cultivating new business prospects.

Think back to the most recent conference you attended. Did you say or even think to yourself any of the following statements before, or even after, the event:

- This is probably going to be (or was) a waste of time;
- The room will probably be (or was) wall-to-wall with lawyers;
- Thank goodness I'm getting (or I got) CLE credit, or this event would be (or would have been) of no value at all;
- I hope my presentation will go (or went) well and I got (or will get) someone's attention to lead to future business;
- At least I can (or could) count on visiting with some of my colleagues and friends.
- It will be (or was) nice to get out of the office for a few days.
- This is (or was) a great opportunity to collect lots of business cards. I really need to follow up with the people I met.

Here's a question for all the litigators out there. Would you willingly head to trial without preparing first? Of course not. Just as there are tried-and-true trial preparation tactics you learned in school and on the job, there are similarly some key elements to obtaining new business from attending professional conferences. Here are a few simple ideas when planning to attend your next conference.

Doing thorough background research on past conferences to determine which sessions and/or receptions might include the best prospects for finding new clients or strategic partners you'd like to

meet.

1. Obtaining the conference guest list in advance in order to understand the background of the attendees. Review the list and place a check next to the people you most want to meet.
2. Connect with specific attendees on LinkedIn and get a dialogue going.
3. Call or email ahead and set up individual meetings (breakfast, lunch, or drinks) with some of the prospective attendees. Reach out a few weeks prior to the event to schedule these meetings so you will have them established well in advance of the event.
4. Try to have a pre-meeting conversation with the event organizer to get more information about the meetings and to possibly arrange introductions when attending. This can pay off big dividends if that person is open to helping you connect at the conference.
5. Set a goal for the number of quality contacts you plan to meet each day. Be aggressive with your numbers to ensure you will meet enough people with whom you'll actually want to follow up after the event.
6. Prepare a professional and non-salesy infomercial or elevator pitch to ensure you are seen as an expert in your practice area.
7. Create a list of relationship-building and business-focused questions to ask those you meet. For example: "What speakers have you seen so far?" Or "What do you enjoy most about working in your field?"

As you know, it's always better to plan ahead, than to simply "wing it." Taking the time to search out prospective clients and strategic partnerships before attending will dramatically improve your chances of meeting these folks at the event. Furthermore, actually scheduling coffee, lunch or cocktail meetings will be a game changer. The alternative might be heading up to your room between sessions and missing critical new business opportunities. You may only have one shot a year to meet some of these high-level people, so be sure to plan ahead. As you may have heard, "Failure to plan is a plan to fail."

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