

We're going to that next conference! How do we go about networking there?

The last editorial contemplated the benefits of attending professional meetings and the “return on investments” of the time we spend at these meetings.^[1] Despite technology and the web that engulfs all of us, human to human connections for the progression of Orthodontics and Orthodontic professionals is a nonnegotiable, even in this era!

That human connection in the world of business and management is referred to as networking. *Networking* is a socioeconomic activity by which groups of like-minded people recognize, create, or act upon professional opportunities, and is critical for growth in any professional endeavor. The benefits from networking in a conference environment include meeting new people who can give you new research or information leads that will open up new possibilities for you, so it pays to keep your mind focused. ” Networking is not something you turn off and on. It is the gathering of acquaintances or contacts — the building up or maintaining of informal relationships, especially with people whose friendship could bring advantages such as jobs or professional opportunities. Networking is something every professional must do week in and week out. Successful networking takes “perspective, preparation and practice. Networking at a conference is easier than you think—even if you are shy or don’t enjoy participating in networking.

If the big names floor you, and you’re feeling intimidated by the experts around, take a deep breath and prepare to realize the opportunity this event presents.^[2] This editorial reviews some tried and tested protocols for helping you to make the most of the big thinkers and agenda-setters at a conference while you’ve got them close.

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START NETWORKING BEFORE YOU EVEN GET TO THE CONFERENCE

It’s important to know who your fellow attendees will be and what their specializations, topics of interest, or expertise is. In particular, look up the people who will be presenting at the conference. They are the influencers who can help you get better networked into your area of focus, or who may even be able to share ideas with you or give you a little time to talk through things that you’re doing.

Take the time to visit the presenters’ websites, if relevant. They should also have E-mail addresses on their websites. If they don’t, try to find them on sites like LinkedIn, Facebook or ask common acquaintances.

If you’re aiming to network with someone working for a company that sells orthodontic products, also research the company’s background and relevant information.

E-mail these influencers to let them know that you look forward to hearing their talks. You’re growing a relationship when you recognize someone for the valuable expertise they’ll be sharing at the conference. These presenters will appreciate you taking the time, and you’ll gain relationship equity with them. They will, most likely, E-mail you back and thank you. Now you can re-email them and let them know you will make sure you introduce yourself, in person, when you see them at the event.

INTRODUCE YOURSELF AT THE EVENT

Attend the talks of those presenters you have E-mailed. Go early and sit in the front row so that you’re in a good position to reach them after the talk. Turn off your cell phone if you haven’t already done so. Be attentive so that you can raise any particular points with them afterward if the opportunity presents itself. After their presentation, take up a business card with a personalized note you’ve already written on the back, and start telling them how much you appreciated their insights. This will build even more relationship equity. Introduce yourself, compliment the presenter on their presentation, saying briefly why you liked it, and ask any relevant questions that you have.

Be sure that your business card is up-to-date with the latest details to contact you. If what you do is not clear from the card, be sure to fix that because the presenters will be receiving many cards, and you don't want to be lost in the pile because of ambiguity. Furthermore, be sure to use clean, unbent cards for a professional look.

You can also ask to follow up with a quick phone call later with a question you may have about their presentation. Now you're at the point where you have really created a connection and more likely than not, laid the groundwork for a long-term connection with whom you can develop all kinds of new professional, creative, scientific, or career opportunities.

BE READY TO GET TO THE POINT QUICKLY

Presenters, Opinion Leaders, Traders, and others associated with the conference will generally be time-limited and won't get much of a chance to stand around chatting with you. This is an aspect that often scares novice networkers because they're worried about being tongue-tied. As with giving the business card, it's a really good idea to role-play the kind of conversation openers and content that you'd like to convey with the particular person. Coupled with your prior research into their expertise, you should be able to hone down the precise things that you'd like to get across in a very short period of time.

Make a list of questions you'd like to ask the presenter. Consider picking the most important two questions in case you really are time pressured, so that you get the optimal connection without feeling too flustered.

One-way of getting assurance that your questions are welcome is to preface the conversation with something like: "Have I caught you at a bad time? I had two quick questions I wanted to ask you."

Bear in mind that you might be able to arrange to see them later at a dinner event or similar event during the conference if they're not free straight after their talk. Still aim to give them your business card, but be sure to make time or reason to catch up again during the period of the conference.

If you have promotional material, paper, or any other documentation or software that you'd like the presenter to have, be sure to have it ready and packaged up to give to the presenter. This is a good way of having a reason for more follow-ups too, as you can ask the presenter what they thought of the things you gave them.

LISTEN

Whatever opportunity you get to network directly with the presenter, be sure to listen well. A good networker is a good listener and while you're talking to the presenter, focus on them and their answers to your questions and not on anybody else in the room. Limit your own talking and encourage the presenter to talk. Whatever you do, no matter how excited or enamored of this person's expertise/fame/importance you are, don't jump to conclusions about what they're going to say next and try to fill it in for them. Remain calm and let them do the talking. Stay positive and don't fear pauses. Be considerate of the fact that the conference is probably abuzz with atmosphere and more overwhelming for the presenter than it is for you even.

MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT, NOD, AND UNFOLD YOUR ARMS

Don't be afraid to make notes on your business cards or in your smart phone if there is anything you promise to follow-up. This shows your enthusiasm and willingness to do what you've promised. It also ensures that you won't forget!

LEARN HOW TO EXCUSE YOURSELF GRACEFULLY

There will be times when the presenter doesn't turn out to be the right contact you were hoping to connect with, or you start being clearly aware yourself that the presenter does not appear that interested to talk with you. In this case, excuse yourself politely, thank them for their time, and continue your networking with other members of the conference.

SEE, WHICH OTHER CONFERENCE ATTENDEES SEEM TO BE WITH THE PRESENTER

If the presenter came alone, then this step won't be of help. But if the presenter came with a team and some of them are part of the audience, try to network with them and exchange business cards. Let them know what your research, or study is, and see whether it is possible for them to connect you to the presenter in some way, or even better, find out which other people within the presenter's team are worth connecting with more deeply in terms of exchanging information and ideas.

Remember that those who act as "spheres of influence," while often lower in an institution, or organization, have just as much importance. They are the people who have

time to listen to others and are proud of what they do and are happy to share information to others. These people will network with integrity and can share good information with you and be important contacts too. For example, you might have wanted to discuss something with the professor who just gave the presentation but he's had to rush back to his baby's birth. If his PhD student is attending the conference too, find her and ask her the questions and share your ideas. If she's convinced that you're genuine and someone definitely worth staying in touch with, she'll help remind the professor about you. Just be sure to keep in touch with both her and the professor after the conference.

FOLLOW-UP

If you can, send a relevant article to the topic they shared. This will show that you have an avid interest in the topic and that you're willing to share information with them. Even a similar treated case with records, might help. And if possible, connect the presenter with other relevant people you know personally and share information as generously as you can.

Follow-up with promptness anything that you promised you'd do. If you find for some reason that cannot meet the promise, let the presenter know that there has been a problem and what you intend to do next. Keep the channels of communication flowing; not everyone follow-up after networking and they miss enormous opportunities.

You can stay in touch with the presenter by E-mail and phone. Anything can happen here. It's all about sharing

who you are and what skills you offer to the world of work that should start a great conversation around connections and opportunities for all those great influences you meet at conferences.

This editorial and the previous one were intended to reignite the spark that drives professionals like us to meetings, and keep the humaneness of professional interactions alive, something that most successful orthodontists treasure most about their careers when they hang in their boots!



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