

Carol Smith's Guide to Attending

Meetings, Conferences, & Conventions

Seminars, regional conferences, and conventions abound. Maximize the return on your investment of time and money by keeping these hints in mind.

Screening

- When a brochure describing an upcoming event arrives and you find yourself intrigued with the thought of attending, read carefully to confirm that the scope and content of the program offers value for you.
- Check the dates against your calendar to confirm that you have the time available without causing conflicts with other responsibilities. Record the program on your calendar, allowing for travel time. I can attest to the fact that scheduling yourself to be in San Diego and Philadelphia on the same day creates an interesting dilemma.
- Budget for the meeting registration cost as well as an estimate of your travel and accommodation expenses.

Registration Realities

- Register ASAP to take advantage of any discounts and save standing in sometimes long on-site registration lines. Being a “walk-in” can be risky at popular programs. You may find that you traveled a long distance only to be turned away at the door, much to the chagrin of yourself and the meeting planners as well. If last minute registration is necessary, call to confirm that space will be available.
- Double check registration paperwork to confirm that you have completed all applicable blanks, enclosed a check for the required amount, or provided your credit card number and its expiration date correctly.
- Copy completed registration forms before mailing them and mark your calendar several weeks out as a reminder to be expecting a confirmation.
- If you fax a registration, follow up with a phone call to confirm it was received.
- Set up a file to store information about the program—starting with the brochure that convinced you to attend and copies of your registration materials.
- When your meeting credentials—confirmation of registration, receipt, name tag, admission slip, or so on—arrive, store them in your meeting file. The last thing you need on the day you depart is a panic-stricken search of your office for these items. This file is a good place to put travel information, notes about your objectives, or reminders about people to contact at the conference.

- Begin a list of tasks to address before you leave so that things at home will be under control while you are gone. You might list reminders such as–
 - Change the voice mail message
 - Switch on the out-of-office auto reply for your e-mail
 - Approve bills; sign checks
 - Schedule someone else to be “on call”
- If you will be gone more than two days, strive to keep the first day after you return free of appointments. This will give you an opportunity to catch up with your staff, reflect on what you learned at the meeting, organize your priorities, and get ready to move forward with action items you identified. (Do the same thing when you go on vacation.)

Travel and Accommodations

- You will make your own travel arrangements. The earlier you make a plane reservation the less your ticket is likely to cost and the more choices you will have about times and seats. File your paper ticket or e-ticket receipt in the meeting file.
- Expect to arrange and pay for your hotel accommodations. In some cases, as with the NAHB annual International Builders’ Show, hotels may be assigned based on your home state–this is because of the extremely large numbers of attendees.
- The hotel will require a charge card number to hold the room and some may expect a deposit equal to one night’s room and tax. Obtain a confirmation or reservation number.
- Examine a map and ask your hotel about ground transportation prior to making a decision about a rental car. (I once rented a car at \$60 per day for three days, paid the hotel \$18 a day (yes, they actually charge that much) for “parking privileges” and the conference kept me so busy I did not leave the hotel once during the entire three days. A shuttle would have been \$40 round trip.)
- Ask whether your hotel charges for self-parking, whether valet parking is available, and if so, at what cost. If the hotel has a parking garage, ask where the entrance is; access is often on a different street than the hotel’s main entrance.
- If you decide an airport shuttle makes sense, the hotel can advise you on cost (usually the least expensive transportation), scheduling (longest I’ve waited is 30 minutes), and whether you need a reservation (more likely on your return trip).

One disadvantage to a shuttle is the probability that it will make several stops to drop off other passengers before getting to your hotel. (Your hotel will be the last destination unless I’m on the shuttle with you, in which case *my* hotel will be last.) The ride can be an exciting one if the driver is paid on routes completed so wear the seat belt if you have access to one. Keep your laptop with you as bags stored in the back sometimes hit the pavement when other passengers are dropped at their destinations.

- If a rental car is part of your plan, make that reservation early and get a confirmation number. Note the price you are quoted–and hold your laughter as the agent lists the multiple additional charges that will apply.
- You are likely to find a location/maps link on the e-mail reservation confirmation from your hotel. These can be extremely helpful if you are driving a rental car. For comparison purposes, enter the hotel address in Map Quest or a similar program and see how directions match up.

Goals and Objectives

- Registration materials typically include a schedule of seminars and information about presenters. Review these to sort out how best to spend your time. List objectives, questions you want to get answered, topics you want to check out, and products of special interest if exhibits are available.
- Avoid over scheduling yourself. Leave some open space for general touring of exhibits and conversation with new folks you'll meet.
- If the conference includes exhibitors, set aside some time to “walk the floor” and see what's new. Registration materials will list the hours that exhibits are open; these may differ from seminar times.
- Break out of your mold and attend a seminar on at least one new subject.

Prepare to Leave

- A few days prior to leaving, confirm your hotel reservation and car rental (if applicable). When you talk to the hotel, ask for directions so you can find it easily—well, maybe easily is expecting too much. So you can find it.
- Leave your flight information and the local hotel phone number with your family. If you called an 800 number to make your reservation, the agent who answers can provide the direct number to the hotel, the address, directions, and a run-down on amenities.
- Unless you have your address book on your computer, photo copy your address book in case you lose the hard copy.
- Carry-on luggage is the safest. If checking a bag is necessary, carry-on the items you would need to get comfortably through the first 24 hours—just in case. Include medications, valuables, and fragile items in your carry-on. Tape your business card on your laptop in preparation for security screening.
- Have your name and address on all bags. Mark any bags you will check with something distinctive such as a bright ribbon or an unusual luggage strap to make them easier to spot in the baggage claim area. Put a business card inside a pocket on all checked bags in case your official name tag is broken off. (While you're at it, put a business card in your coat pocket, too.)
- Check the weather prediction the day before departure to finalize decisions about what clothing to pack. For most meetings business casual is acceptable, although you may need a dressy outfit for a special event such as an awards banquet.
- Pack comfortable shoes. This is not the time to break in those fabulous looking but slightly tight new shoes.
- The temperature in seminar rooms is notoriously difficult to control so plan layered outfits that give you the flexibility of adding or removing a jacket or sweater.
- Plan clothing with pockets for business cards—the left pocket for a supply of your business cards and the right pocket for the business cards you collect. (Handing someone your card with your left hand allows you to shake hands with your right.)

- Speaking of business cards, pack plenty of them so you can avoid writing your name and address on a slip of paper torn from the corner of a seminar handout. Now is a good time to review your business card—does it include your area code, e-mail address, correct mailing address and all phone numbers you want in circulation—with your extension?
- Avoid, if possible, having extra items to carry or keep track of—the surroundings may be crowded and include many distractions. Gloves or sunglasses are easy to lose. Leave irreplaceable items (such as the scarf your daughter made for your birthday) at home.
- Consider whether a fanny pack might be a useful place to carry some cash, your hotel room key, and the program schedule.
- Designate a place (such as an envelope at the back of your appointment book or brief case) to keep receipts you will accumulate and get in the habit of putting all of them there—including parking and road toll receipts. This will make completing your expense report and taking all appropriate deductions easier upon your return.
- Let associates at work know approximately when you will check in with them or pick up messages. They need to know what to tell people trying to reach you and how to reach you themselves in an emergency.

Departure Day

- Count on over booked flights and arrive at the airport at least an hour and a half before flight time to check in. Carry something to read or work on so you can make productive use of waiting and flight time. If your flight is delayed keeping yourself occupied eases the frustration of sitting in the terminal (my record is 8 hours, 10 minutes—United), or worse, on the runway (5 hours, 20 minutes—also United).
- If your flight is canceled, the plane has a serious mechanical problem, or for whatever reason your original plane is not going to your destination, do not, repeat, do NOT get in the customer service line with 300 other angry passengers and stand there for three hours seething. Call the 800 reservation number for your airline, explain what happened to a calm, courteous agent and get booked on another flight.
- Upon arrival at the hotel, learn how the phone message system works—most have voice mail—and take note of charges for phone use. Some hotels even charge you for using your 800 long-distance service.
- Items can be faxed to you at your hotel. A staff person will slide items under your door or your message light will be blinking if you receive something. The person back home who is faxing something to you should alert you that the item is coming and put your name followed by “guest” on the cover sheet.
- If a convention center map is available, review it to get your bearings and select some landmarks as reference points, both inside and out. Also, before doing anything else, locate (as applicable) each of the following—
 - Registration booth for picking up conference credentials
 - Restrooms, refreshments, the information counter, and phones
 - Bookstore or program recording order desk
 - Seminar rooms
 - Exhibits
- Orient yourself to the parking or transportation facilities. Shuttle busses may be provided from specified hotels on a published schedule. You will find the schedule posted near the exit door where the bus picks up passengers; expect them to run slightly late so allow plenty of time to get where you need to be.

- If you are driving a rental car, avoid relying on an overloaded memory. Make note of the color and make of the car you have—this information is usually on the key ring, also. (It is surprisingly easy to overlook the color of a rental car, especially if you pick it up at night.)
- Jot down information about where you parked—east or west section, row 27, or row H—or any similar detail that will help you locate your car when the exiting crowd descends on the parking lot. Remember that it may be dark when you come back to the car. You can feel supremely silly walking the lot looking for the vehicle with the license number shown on your car key. (I know this from personal experience.)
- If you are attending a large convention with fellow employees or your spouse, you can cover more programs if you separate. In this case, agree on a meeting spot so you can find each other again.
- Avoid collecting endless materials—catalogues and brochures—from exhibitors. You do not want to dislocate your shoulder putting your carry-on in the overhead bin—or worse, put the plane over its weight limit for take-off. Collect literature about the most important items and let manufacturers mail the rest to you—they are delighted to put you on their mailing list and you will receive updates as they come out (for years).
- Large conferences often supply an ID card that the exhibitors simply swipe through the scanner to add you to their mailing list.
- Because you can't be in two places at once you may miss a desirable seminar while sitting through another desirable seminar. Consider ordering the recording if one is available. Some programs are so useful you want to share them with colleagues back home.
- Either way, listen to all tapes you purchase promptly. It sometimes happens that you get a tape that is (a) blank or (b) not what the label attached indicates. I own a tape purported to describe time management when, in fact, it contains a discussion of military housing issues. Since I didn't listen to it until 2 years after buying it (I didn't have time), asking for a replacement is awkward.
- Arrive at meeting rooms early enough to get a good seat. The definition of good seat varies. Sometimes a good seat is the center front, other times it's near the door in case the topic turns out not to be what you expected and you decide your time is better spent elsewhere. If you decide to leave, do so as quietly as possible to avoid disturbing those around you.
- If a name tag is provided, the best place for it is on right shoulder. When you shake hands with people, their eyes naturally look at your right shoulder where your name appears, helping them to remember your name.
- Introduce yourself to people you sit with. Develop and practice a 15 second introduction of yourself and your company—two or three sentences. When you meet someone, they may ask “What do you do?” “Who are you with?” or “Where are you from?” Have answers ready. Another common question is, “This your first time attending <meeting>?”
- When you exchange business cards, note the date and common interest you have with this person on the back of the card you receive. Jot down on the card any commitment you made, such as sending a copy of a form you talked about.
- Check your handshake. A good business handshake is palm to palm, thumbs meeting, and hands positioned straight up and down (side of your hand perpendicular to the floor). Palm down indicates a domineering nature, palm up a submissive one. In a business setting, equality is appropriate. Avoid bone crushing or limp, fingertip handshakes. Three “shakes” up and down are sufficient. If the environment permits, stand up to shake hands. Etiquette books suggest a man should wait for a woman to extend her hand in offer of a handshake. (The only problem is this approach assumes all women have read the etiquette book.) However, in a business setting is it

acceptable and appropriate for either party to offer to shake hands. Also, be aware that folks from other cultures may be unaccustomed to shaking hands and take your cue from them.

- Some conferences provide participants with a binder containing the handouts for all sessions. In others the handout material will be on tables near the doors or on chairs in the seminar room. Look for extra materials the speaker may set out—such as related articles or sample forms added to supplement information covered in the presentation.
- As you listen to the speaker or panel, take notes, emphasizing action items relevant to you. Write down more than you think you will need to remember the points of interest. Memories fade rapidly once you leave the seminar room; what seemed absolutely clear while you were there may make no sense back in your office. Extra details can make all the difference.
- Speakers appreciate a thank you if you found the program especially useful. Most are happy to answer your individual questions, but be sensitive to the next group using the room or the speaker's next assignment.
- Food and beverages will be pricey, can be tasty and sometimes even healthy. The opposite is also possible, refreshments can be pricey, unpalatable, and full of calories and other bad stuff. Notice the pricey part is consistent.
- If you are making several calls from your hotel room, you may save money by using the # sign after each party you call has hung up. You will remain connected to your long distance carrier and avoid a new call charge through the hotel switchboard

Upon Your Return

- That business day with no appointments now becomes a treasure as you reflect on ideas you picked up. Review notes you took during seminars. Use a highlighter or sticky dots to designate important items. After you have marked items you want to act on, sort them into categories: those you will do, others to delegate, still others to go on a pending-action list.
- If you changed your voice message before you left, change it back again. Realizing in August that your greeting still explains that you'll be at a convention until February 12 is embarrassing. Likewise, confirm that your e-mail auto-reply has stopped auto-replying.
- If your company paid your way to this meeting, demonstrate the value of that investment with a one page summary listing the action items you brought back and contacts you made. When the boss sees the impact of this trip, you are likely to be supported when you want to attend something else—and the list serves to organize your follow up plan as well.
- Promptly go through the receipts you gathered and complete your expense report—whether for reimbursement or for your own tax records.
- Review and organize the business cards you collected. Keep in touch with people you met with whom you have similar interests. Although you may not see them again until the next conference, the network you develop is a valuable resource and one of the many benefits of attending such meetings.
- Compare what you learned to your original objectives and add new reminders to this checklist.