

Successfully Navigating a Conference - The First Step Towards An Accomplished Career

Attending a conference is always exciting! All the traveling, meeting new people, learning about other cultures, and exploring new places is all part of an adventure that comes with attending a conference. However, it can also be overwhelming and stressful. There is a reason for attending a conference, right? There are so many decisions to make, so many choices to choose from. Your brain starts to overflow with all kinds of questions. *Which conference would be the most beneficial? From all those, which one should I attend? Can I afford attending? What do I need to do once at the conference? How should I pick what workshop to attend? How can I meet the right people that will help me advance in my career?* Then, out of the blue, you start feeling rapid heart rate and shaky hands, chest pain, palpitations and all those signs of anxiety and stress. Very dramatic, right? If you are experiencing these symptoms or asking yourself these questions when planning to attend a conference, keep reading because this article is for you and the National Security Agency (NSA) has the perfect methodology for strategically cracking the code of navigating a conference.

For most attendees, whether looking to learn what is new and innovative, or meeting people and learning all about the great ideas that they have to share, the goal is the same. Their goal is to advance and grow in their professional field. So, here is the key for cracking the code:

Key = 3

Caesar Cipher text = *vhw d surihvvlrqdo jrdo*

I know! What is that?? Well, we are NSA and can't help it. We protect US government's secrets, but this time we are going to share a little highly classified secret with you. If you are interested, go online and search for Caesar Cipher Decoder. Otherwise keep reading, I will explain now what the key is. But heads up! You have to do a little bit of pre-conference homework.

The **key** for successfully navigating a conference is to **SET A PROFESSIONAL GOAL**. Yes, you read it right! The most important thing for successfully navigating a conference, and keeping yourself from a mental or physical breakdown, is to clearly identify your professional goal. Ask yourself, where you want to be in your professional future, either short or long term. Defining this goal is really important, because all of your conference planning (Yep, the pre-conference homework mentioned before) should align with what you want to get out of it. For example, if your goal is to publish your work, then you need to identify a conference with key players, speakers, and people that will help you get closer to having your work published. On the other hand, if you are looking for collaboration, then identify a conference offering networking opportunities and speakers with whom you can collaborate. Perhaps, you want to focus on learning what is new in your professional field, then choose a conference that aligns with what you want to learn and offers workshops that will expose you to new topics that can help expand your knowledge and/or reinforce skills. So, that is the key. Now, let's get to the rest.

Once professional goals are defined, there are two major avenues to accomplish them, which guess what? They are also major check boxes at conferences. How great is that? It is like killing two birds with one stone or even better (so you don't have to kill those poor birds), buy one get one (BOGO) free (insert "cash in" sound here).

- 1st Ave – To learn. What do you need to know for reaching your professional goals? Do you have the knowledge? If not, then you will have to learn it. Guess what? Conferences are great places to expand your knowledge in something you already know and to develop new knowledge in areas that you are interested in, but know nothing about. All conferences have on their webpage an agenda with time, date, and description of all workshops, briefings and exhibitions. So take your time to build a roadmap of learning opportunities aligning your professional goals.

Hint: Most conferences have a mailing list, join it. Open a new email just for conferences. Do not use your personal email; it will get full in no time. Once you have joined, you will get daily updates about events at the conference that may be interesting and you can include as part of your roadmap.

- 2nd Ave – To expand network. This is a BIG one. I know I know! You are feeling all those anxiety and stress symptoms again, but really, networking is very important. Have you heard people saying, "It's not what you know, but who you know?" Well, that is completely true. Regardless of your professional field, you will always need to expand your network to advance in your career. If you are an introvert, look for other introverts at the conference and engage in conversation (go online and search for some tips, you will be surprised with all the good resources). If you are extrovert, then you have this one covered even before reading this article. So talk to people! Remember the conference agenda? Identify networking opportunities and add those into your conference roadmap. Keep in mind, people at the conference are looking for you too, since your work and experience may align with their professional goals. Do not be shy when talking about your work. Embrace it! Get out of your comfort zone and know people who are different than you. Allow yourself to be surprised by all we have to learn from each other and how all new perspective can help advance your career!

Hint: Always be kind to the people you have the pleasure to meet as you move forward in your career. Remember we are constantly learning and evolving. The person you met today may be a good future collaborator or even who refers you to a job opportunity. So be kind, it costs you nothing and gives you everything.

- 3rd to 5th Ave = 1st + 2nd Avenues! Again, we are NSA and can't help it. Want to expand your network and learning experience? Come and meet NSA and Department of Defense (DoD) amig@s at the Student Orientation. Want to learn about exciting job opportunities and professional development programs? Come and meet NSA at the Career Fair (booth 1410 & 1410), because we are HIRING! Our Hiring Managers will be offering on the spot job offers to qualified candidates. Who said you can't have it all? Come and meet us to find out.

One last thought, remember always to enjoy the ride! Part of your roadmap to achieve your professional goals is to get to enjoy what you do. Do what you love and you won't have to work a single day in your life! See you at the conference, and remember to add NSA to your roadmap.

