

How to Get the Most Out of a Conference

*Text by John Mutikani, Case Western Reserve University
Modified by the Tulane MCPHLT for this handout*

The size and the number of sessions at the APHA Annual Meeting can be overwhelming especially for the first-time attendee. The following are some specific strategies you can use before, during, and after the Annual Meeting to get the maximum return on your time investment. The techniques are organized around the three most common reasons why people plan to attend conferences:

- to improve professional skill and knowledge;
- to develop and renew professional relationships; and
- to obtain professional advice.

This article should give you some ideas about what you can do before, during, and after the conference to make sure that you feel that your time and money were well-spent.

To improve professional skills and knowledge

Before the conference:

- Write down the topics or techniques you need to learn about in order to improve yourself professionally.
- Scan the session titles in the conference program and mark those that you think will be helpful.
- Highlight all interesting sessions. Where conflicts arise, mark them A for attend or H for get handouts.
- If more than one person from your school/institution is going, divide the sessions to maximize your coverage. Share notes daily.

During the conference:

- Review the day's schedule and finalize your day's choices. Check conference materials for time changes, additional sessions, etc.
- Attend your session. Ask questions. If a session is not what you expect or want, go to your second choice. Take notes on ideas you can use. Introduce yourself to people who are attending the same session as you.
- Ask the presenter to meet you later at break or for a meal to discuss the topic in depth.
- Stop by the rooms of your handout choices to pick up a handout or to ask the presenter to send you a handout.

After the conference:

- Review your notes for ideas to use. Identify ideas you want to act on and how you plan to do that.
- Summarize what you learned and what contribution it will make to your program in a memo (to your boss, mentor, advisor, etc.)
- Send a self-addressed stamped envelope with a note to presenters you missed asking for a copy of their handouts.
- Call the presenter to discuss topics in more depth.

To develop professional relationships

Before the conference:

- Write a summary of what you are currently doing, your mission, target population, goals, programs, results, etc. Reproduce about 25 copies as well as your resume if you are job hunting.
- Make a list of old contacts you have seen in the past and hope to see again at the conference.
- Look through the conference program and highlight the names of anyone you would like to meet. Highlight their names on both the presentation description and the schedule.
- Make a new contacts list.

During the conference:

- Each day, decide whom you will try to meet based on the sessions you will be attending.
- Talk to presenters before or after the sessions.
- When you meet new contacts, exchange business cards and suggest that you both stay in touch. Jot some notes from the conversation on the back of the person's card.
- At the end of the day, check off the names of the people you have met and who you will try to meet the following day.

After the conference:

- Send a short note to everyone you met recalling some comments from your conversation.
- Enclose materials you promised to send.
- Write to each person you want to stay in contact with at least once before the next conference.

To obtain professional advice

Before the conference:

- Write down the problems for which you would like advice.
- Decide who would be the best person to talk to or what kind of person would have the information you want.

During the conference:

- Find the people you need to talk to. Ask questions.
- Exchange business cards.
- Ask your contacts "who do you know who would be good to talk to about this issue."
- Do not expect a consultant to give you free samples. This person makes a living by selling advice and information.

After the conference:

- Send a thank-you note if a person has been helpful.

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For more tips about attending APHA, look for the Tulane Maternal and Child Public Health Leadership Training Program Smart Student's Guide to APHA.