

Guide to Getting the Most Out of Conferences and Professional Meetings

1. Go to lots of sessions and find out what's happening in your field and in many others. Meetings are forums for exchanging, discussing, debating scholarship.

But they are also a venue for professional development and networking. So:

2. Plan ahead.

a. If you are in a session, and no one else has suggested it, write to the other participants and propose lunch or tea or whatever fits before or, preferably, after your session. These are people working in somehow related areas from different institutions, with whom you may develop a long-term professional relationship.

b. Whether or not you are giving a paper, read the program in advance. Do you spot the name of someone you have met and would like to speak with again? E-mail and propose having a meal together. Do you spot a paper title that looks right up you alley? Plan to go to the paper.

c. If, among these, there are individuals whose work you have read and who seem “Too Big” to approach directly, tell faculty members from your program in advance that you would like to be introduced--then remind them at the meeting.

d. Think about (and ask your advisors or colleagues about) which presses might be interested in your work, when it becomes a book manuscript. See 3.e below.

e. Depending on what stage you are at, you might consider bringing a couple of copies of your dissertation or book prospectus, and, if you have one, a business card.

3. At the meeting.

a. Even though it is easier to hang out with people you know from your own program, take a deep breath and introduce yourself to others.

b. Go to programmed events outside your field of study. Teaching sessions, sessions and forums for graduate students and early career professionals, breakfasts and receptions for graduate students including specific events for women and minorities. These are places where a lot of productive thinking and networking gets done--about the subject and the historical profession.

c. Take advantage of the social events. They are cleverly designed opportunities for people to find old and make new acquaintances. Lots of people are standing or wandering around alone, trying to look as though they are not. Make a clever remark about the toothpicks or the noise and introduce yourself. This may be easier to do if you pair up with someone you know, and you agree on the project.

d. Spend some time at the book exhibit. There you can browse and survey the current and coming things in the in your field and related fields. It's also a good place to meet people--those you have made plans with and those you do not know but bump into over the latest book on the history of World War I.

e. Peddle your (actual or soon-to-be actual) book manuscript. The publishers' representatives at the book exhibit are not salespeople, they are (or are deputized by) the presses' acquisitions editors in various historical fields. Their job is to discover and nab the best potential books--your dissertation included. Introduce yourself to one or more during the meeting. Mention, very briefly, the topic you are working on, and ask if they would have a moment some time to speak with you. They may invite you behind the table right then, suggest another time to meet, or give you a business card and invite you to send your prospectus. When you speak with them, they are likely to ask about the significance of and audience for your work, as well as its substance. Even if you are not quite there, talking with a publisher will give you some idea of what's involved. It is good practice for you, and it is useful to them to know what is happening in your area.

4. After the meeting, follow up.

a. E-mail the folks you met and would like to stay in touch with.

This text is modified from "Getting the most out of HSS/annual meeting" written on October, 12, 2007 by Joan Cadden, President, The History of Science Society, Professor of History University of California at Davis. The AHA thanks her for allowing the Association to use her text.