IMPROVE SALES PERFORMANCE

Sell More Stuff!

15 PROVEN TIPS TO SETTING CONFERENCE SALES MEETINGS

Never again feel like you're wasting time and money at conferences

SALESQUALIA

I've been there. I promise.

It's 8 am on Monday morning of the "Big Industry Conference" and you're standing by yourself eating cold eggs and rubbery bacon and beaming excitement for the next two days. Except that you're standing by yourself at the "Big Industry Conference"…

By 10:30 am, you've been to the first two sessions and already walked the exhibitor hall twice, and now you're wondering why you flew across the country for three days of fluorescent lights in a monstrous hotel that you'll never see the outside of.

It's brutal drinking coffee-flavored water while your brain feels fuzzy from the jet lag. It's dreary standing in long lunch buffet lines for cold fajitas. It's lonely and it sucks.

You want to run back to your room and check email. You want to call your VP of Engineering to "check in" on the current sprint and share a marginal idea that you think you had. You know that conversation will kill thirty minutes before the next session you don't really want to go to, but your only meeting of the day just cancelled on you and you don't have anything else to do.

Yes, I've been there as an entrepreneur, as a sales professional and as a sales manager. And guess what? I never feel like that anymore.

Imagine returning triumphantly to the office and everyone on your team asks, "How was the conference?" You can share jubilantly, "It was really great! We had 15 meetings and several of them want a product demo this week. I figured out how we can get a couple of stale customer leads off the fence, and I think there's a new market opportunity emerging that we can address better than anyone. Let's get to work!"

Over the past twenty years, I've attended hundreds of industry conferences spanning several industries - software, telecomm, education, government, academia, publishing, electronics, and mortgages. I've learned and developed hundreds (yes, hundreds!) of tips and tricks for getting the most out of conference events - from scheduling meetings to hosting those meetings to meeting new people to following up after the conference - and I'm thrilled to share these ideas with you!

Preparing for meetings:

☐ 1. Start with the registration list.

Depending on the conference and event organizers, the way you receive the list may vary. The registration list might be a downloadable PDF, a spreadsheet emailed to you by the conference organizers, or simply an online search result page with only 20 results showing at a time.

Regardless, migrate the list to a spreadsheet so you can sort by any of the data fields provided to you.

Scan through the list and remove the vendors. You don't want to talk to other people also attending the conference planning to sell their stuff.

Now you're ready to get to work by targeting attendees with senior management titles. This will vary depending on your industry. A few examples:

- Vice President, Senior Vice President, Executive Vice President
- Director, Senior Director, Managing Director
- CEO, CIO, CTO, CFO - i.e., all of the CXO titles

Once you've filter
- i.e., " > VP" + "Lending"

(Oh, by the way, don't expect the list to include email addresses. It will more likely include first name, last name, title, and company. That's about it. You'll need to use LinkedIn and other selling tools to get in touch with these people. More on that later.)

ProTip: See if you can get cozy with a marketing consultant or a friend at a company that sponsors and attends the conference regularly. Beg, borrow, barter and plead for help.

☐ 2. Begin setting meetings 3-4 weeks in advance. Then two weeks out. Then one week out.

Divide your list into 3-4 groups that are somewhat randomized, by alphabetical order for example. You're going to be sending out meeting requests to various individuals with different titles across different areas of specialization. Because you'll want to test your outbound message, it's important to avoid hitting all of the CEOs with a message that might not elicit a lot of responses.

By breaking the list into ABC order, you'll get a smattering of people at different job levels and titles.

Then, do another pass through your list two weeks from the conference and then the final group about a week from the event.

(This reminds me of how my wife and I set up our wedding invitation list. We had three groups - As, Bs, and Cs. The "A" group invitations went out first, well in advance to see what response we got. Then, when we knew we had enough spots for the Bs, we sent those invitations. The remaining spots were filled with the Cs.)

☐ 3. Check for an updated conference registration list the week before the conference.

There are often late registrations and many top executives register late because they don't know their schedules.

Here's the best part - these late registrants haven't been hit up for meetings because they weren't on the original registration list you or anyone else downloaded a few weeks ago. Take a pass and hit up anyone new to the list.

☐ 4. Cross-reference the speaker list to see if anyone you're targeting is on the agenda.

If so, be sure to mention their session in your outreach. Speakers and panelists are often paranoid that no one is going to attend their session and all of the time they put into their presentation will be wasted. Tell them you plan to attend their session and why.

☐ 5. Use LinkedIn InMails to send meeting requests.

• InMail is currency, sort of. InMails only come with premium LinkedIn subscriptions and you receive a fixed amount each month, so when you "spend" an InMail, you're telling the other person they are valuable.
• People don't get many InMails - it's like sending a handwritten postcard to someone. (Though I've noticed an uptick in InMails of late in my own inbox, so no excuses for boring or poorly crafted InMail messages.)
• Most people have their LinkedIn accounts tied to a personal email, so your InMail usually will show up in a personal email inbox instead work email inbox. This makes your message stand out compared to emails with the person's siblings or friends, and you'll only be one of a few emails in the recipients personal email box instead of one of hundreds of emails in their work inbox.

☐ 6. Personalize your Inmails.

• Reference common contacts if you have a 2nd level connection with anyone and how you know the person you are referencing. "Hi [insert name] - I saw we both know John Smith from Microsoft. John and I worked together a couple of years back on a release of Windows."
• Then, show the person you've done your research about them - "I saw that you're an executive at Google focusing on data security and protection."
• Next, state why you are contacting the person - "My company - Security Plus - is developing a new way to encrypt personally identifiable data and I thought you'd be a great person to ask a few questions about how we should develop our product."

• Next, ask for time at the conference - "I saw your name on the ITS Security Conference registration list and I'd really appreciate 15-20 minutes of your time."
• Wrap up with some personality - "I can't offer much except a Starbucks, but you can even order a triple latte if you want."
• Then, finish with time suggestions and a question - "My schedule is pretty open on Monday morning before 11 am and Tuesday afternoon after 3 pm. Would you happen to have a few minutes?"
• Finish cordially - "Many thanks for reading this far."

☐ 7. Send out Inmails in batches of 7-10 at a time and then take a break.

If you're doing this process correctly (researching individuals and personalizing InMails), this will take you about 10-15 minutes per Inmail, and after a while, your brain needs a break so you don't misstep, like copy and paste a message that references the wrong name or company. (Yes, I've done this...)

☐ 8. When you get a response, migrate the conversa tion out of LinkedIn and into email as quickly as possible.

Lots of replies I receive from my InMails are short and non-specific, like "Thanks for reaching out. Yes - would like to get together."

Umm... Okay... So now what?

Reply back via LinkedIn, and:
- Ask for the person's work email address. Tell them that you want to set up a time and send over a calendar invite.
- Send your mobile number and email.
- Suggest they do the same so you can text/email to confirm when you arrive at the conference.

☐ 9. If someone says they can only meet on a day you're not planning to be at the event, take the meeting and later, see if you can move it. Bet you can.

Many conferences run Sunday through Wednesday, with Sunday as the registration/check-in day and maybe some specialty or breakouts sessions, or the opening cocktail reception. On Wednesday, there are usually holdover sessions, leaving Monday and Tuesday as the bulk of the meeting time.

Say something like, "Ok, let's book it for Wednesday at 9 am as long as I'm not the only reason you're staying at the event that long. I might ping you to see if we can meet earlier during the conference, if possible."

It's completely okay to let the person know you have to leave on Tuesday to get back to the office and you won't be able to meet on Wednesday under this context, because you're already told the person it is somewhat tentative.

Then, use the missed meeting as leverage for a phone call in a week or so.

☐ 10. Don't send a LinkedIn connection request right away after setting up a meeting.

Send a connection request AFTER you've met the person. Of course, if they send you a connection request, be sure to accept it right away and then send them a quick note thanking them for connecting.

Then, be sure to look for that person as a possible 2nd level connection on LinkedIn for more people you are contacting. After a while in an industry, everyone knows everyone so know you can leverage that connection with new meeting requests.

☐ 11. When setting a meeting time, use the time zone where the conference is hosted.

For example, if the conference is in Miami, even if you and your new contact are both in California, set times for the Eastern time zone. In suggesting times, be sure you specify this too.

For example:

“I’m open at the following times next week:

Mon: 8 am ET, 12:30 pm ET, 4:30 pm ET
Tues: 10 am ET, 11 am ET, 2 pm ET

Do any of these times work for you?"

☐ 12. Research the hotel website and conference to find 2-3 easy-to-find location spots and stick to them.

Call the front desk. Find out where the conference happenings are relative to the front desk and the rest of the hotel. Some really big hotels have multiple towers and can be extremely large, especially in places like Orlando and Las Vegas. You might think that meeting in the lobby is convenient, but that can turn into a 15 minute walk from the conference to meet there.

Whatever spots you chose should be easy for the person to identify. There should be a place to sit down nearby. If not, scope out the closest place to sit down when you meet up with your contact - “You know what, there’s a quiet spot over here around the corner by the business center. Let’s grab a seat over there."

A few top spots for me:

• **Hotel coffee shop:** Most hotels hosting conferences are full-service hotels like Marriotts, Hiltons, and Sheratons. They usually have a mini-Starbucks in the hotel with some seating. This is usually a good place that's close to the conference happenings and offers a place to sit down. But, sometimes these places get jammed so be forewarned.

• **At the conference registration/check-in desk:** Everyone at the conference has had to stop here to pick up their badge so they know where it is, and it's centrally located. Also, you can make nice with the people working the conference registration desk later on Day 1 or Day 2 when they're sitting there bored and alone because everyone has checked it. Ask them about the conference and ask them for help. They are usually very nice people and you are their customer - you paid to attend the event and they want you to have a good experience. You can even mention, "You know, I was thinking about sponsoring next year. Is that a good idea? Could I get a copy of the final registration list to share with my team?"

• **Outside of the Expo Hall:** Most people have at least wandered into the Expo Hall for free coffee or another meeting, so it's another easy place to meet. Plus, you can glance at name badges of other people hanging around and introduce yourself and ask them, "What brings you to the conference?"

• **Hotel lobby:** Usually lots of seats and a big open space makes it easy to watch people come and go to find your meeting person.

• **Hotel bar:** During the morning, there can be lots of open seats because the hotel bar doesn't open until mid- to late-afternoon. It's a nice place to meet away from the conference craziness (as long as it's not too far to walk). I don't suggest this for late afternoon meetings because people might think you're there to drink a beer instead of meet them. A surprising number of people don't drink alcohol, at least not at 4 pm on a Monday afternoon, and you don't want to make them feel uncomfortable.

☐ 13. Stay at the conference hotel if at all possible.

• If you can't afford it, find the closest possible option, preferably no more than five minute walk to avoid lugging around all of your belongings all day long.
• This also increases the chance of random interactions at the gym, elevators, and lobby with anyone related to the conference - "Are you here for the SecInfo Conference? Really? Me too! What brings you here?..."

☐ 14. Don't schedule outside calls during the conference.

Sometimes this can't be avoided - you have a customer call or an investor call, or a call with an engineering candidate. That happens. Just try to avoid it. It's taxing and makes focusing on the conference and your meetings more difficult.

☐ 15. Download the LinkedIn mobile app and use it to look up people as you are walking to your next meeting.

A little refresher for yourself around who you might know in common, places they've worked, and where they went to school.

You can even say when the person shows up to your meeting, "I was just reminding myself of your background on LinkedIn and saw you went to Ohio State. My sister-in-law just graduated from there (or whatever factual statement you can make about their background to create a common linkage).

Those are my first 15 tips for you. I've got plenty more... ☺

If you like what you've read here or have a few tips of your own that you'd like to share, send me an email or tweet me:

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