

How to Effectively Network During an In-Person Conference: Insights for Junior Researchers

In-person conferences are the preferred way to learn for most cardiologists. In addition, conferences play an important role in networking by providing opportunities to collaborate on projects and identify mentors. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most in-person medical conferences were canceled over the past 2 years. While in-person conferences have resumed, there are limited resources to guide junior researchers on how to make the most of their conference attendance. We put forward several recommendations that could assist trainees to maximize their participation.

Proactively review the list of presenters, registrants, and look up the names of your past mentors and friends and of potential future collaborators (Figure 1). The list of presenters/attendees is available on the conference website or the conference mobile application (e.g., ACC 2022). Contacting potential mentors for the first time by calling/texting them may not be appropriate. Find out what, when, and where they are presenting and reach out to them (email/social media message) before the meeting to arrange a meeting during the conference. When you are contacting potential mentors, by sending your CV, and explaining how your research interest fits into the mentor's work, you might facilitate collaborations. In addition, younger mentors may be easier to communicate with and more interested in taking on new mentees for future projects. Some of the faculty or colleagues you want to meet may not have a presentation. In this case, you can utilize the search function of the meeting mobile application and identify if they have registered for the meeting. Another method is to contact them via email or text and find out if they are planning to attend. Most attendees are not at the

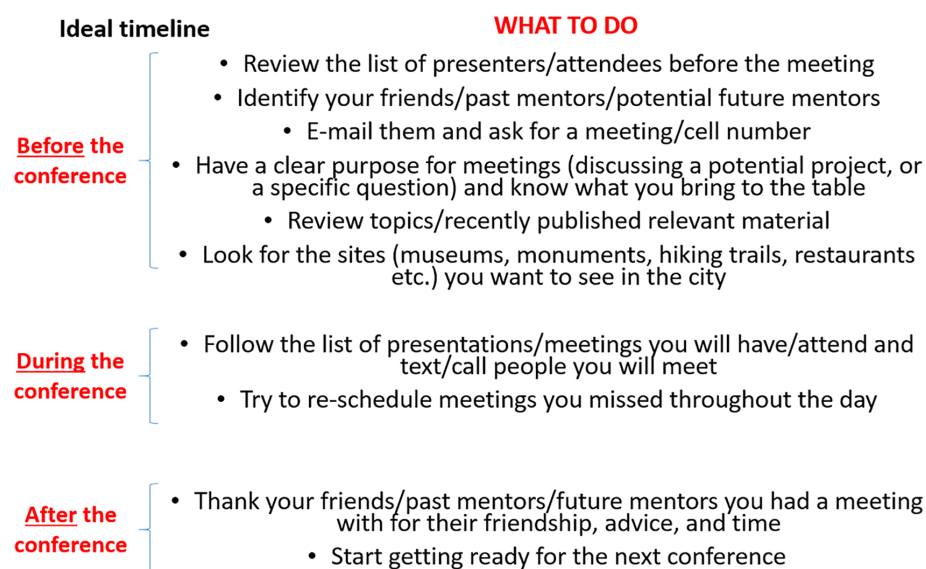


Figure 1. How to network in a medical conference.

SCIENTIFIC LETTER

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meeting for the entirety of the conference. Therefore, planning ahead will serve you well in creating your schedule.

There could be several sessions of interest to you taking place concurrently, making it impossible to attend them all. Rather than trying to meet all the speakers and faculty, narrow down your program to a niche and meet with people who specialize in your area of interest. Potential future mentors most likely have a tight schedule and often receive similar collaboration/mentorship requests. Therefore, it is vital to review the presentation topics and recent relevant publications beforehand, which will assist you in articulating your potential contribution when you meet potential collaborators.

Meeting past mentors at a conference could help them remember you and help you keep them posted about your progress, which can be useful for further collaborations and if you will be asking for a reference letter. While email updates can be helpful, in-person updates at a medical conference (especially if you are presenting at the conference) are hard to beat. Meeting with your friends from all around the country/world could help you catch up on each other's progress, exchange ideas, become motivated, and potentially create new collaborations.

While the importance of business cards is debated with increasingly common use of social media, business cards still provide an efficient way of introducing yourself and sharing your contact information. In addition, business cards serve as a reminder of the interaction, increasing the likelihood of future collaboration.

Given the time constraints at a medical conference, first impressions matter. Besides the usual professional attire, if you have a poster presentation, it can be a good idea to carry your poster with you to your meetings to imply that you are there to present your work and that you are a productive person who delivers results. Displaying your poster, just by carrying it with you, could also be a good conversation starter about your work and lead to future project/collaborations. It is probable that after you introduce yourself in person to a faculty at a medical conference, the likelihood that they will respond to your future emails will be higher.

Meetings can be hectic and people often travel together with their teams; therefore, it might be hard to have a schedule set in stone, hence you need to be flexible. If you have presentation(s) at the conference, use the time of your presentation as a reference point to schedule other activities. While large meetings such as ACC/ESC might be helpful, junior researchers might have more networking opportunities in more targeted meetings like courses.

When you are at the conference and have a list of past mentors/friends and future mentors/collaborators you would like to meet during the conference, contact them (text/call) and see if they are available. A meeting could be in the form of a lunch or before/after your or their presentations or going

out after conference for an event. Meeting more senior researchers could be challenging given that their schedule is usually tight. However, if you are well prepared (you know where and when they will present and arrive a few minutes earlier), you can have a few minutes with them before/after their presentation/session. Especially when approaching people you have not worked with in the past (potential future mentors), have a clear purpose in your mind (e.g., a potential project you would like to work on with them, need their input on a specific question, etc.) so that you can convey that you are well-prepared, focused, and "worthy of their time." Your phone will be essential throughout the day and have your power bank/charger nearby. In addition, being pleasant and friendly will convey that you are easy to work with and a team player as opposed to frantically running around and rushing through conversations.

Understand that just because the conference lasts from early in the morning to late in the evening, you are not expected to be at the conference for the entirety of the day. Do not forget to have some fun too! Before you travel to the conference city/venue, search for the hiking/running trails, restaurants, museums, monuments, and historic areas that you might be interested in visiting. While some of the places of interest might be free to visit, you may have to make a reservation several weeks in advance.

Contact the people you met at the meeting and thank them for their friendship, advice, time, and start preparing materials to submit to the next conferences if you have not yet done so. Moreover, sharing your experience on professional social media venues such as medical Twitter (#MedTwitter) and LinkedIn could further highlight your participation and productivity in the conference, and your eagerness to learn.

CONCLUSION

In summary, conferences are excellent opportunities to present your work, learn about the latest developments, catch up with your colleagues and past mentors, connect with future mentors, and explore a city. As Benjamin Franklin said, "If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail."

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