



Finding Impact's Guide to Being a Conference Ninja

Conferences are a great place to learn and connect from others in our field. But they're also a big bet investment of our scarce time. As a social entrepreneur, we have to ace every conference we go to. This is the prime opportunity to connect with people in ways that could change the whole landscape of your enterprise, be that through specific advice on a challenge you're facing or the first step in securing a new round of investment.

To get the most out of them, you have to be prepared. In this guide, I'm giving you my strategies and tactics I've noted down trying and failing at attending over 30 conferences with a healthy impatience of questioning why I'm there. But you're also going to learn a ton more, so please pay it forward by shooting me an email andy@findingimpact.com to share what you've learned.

So here goes: the before, during and after phases of your next conference.

Before

Figure out why you're there. You're not going for the nibbles, you're going because you're researching a new social business idea, to generate new funding leads, to help solve a particular challenge you're facing or something else. So the first step is to have a goal.

Get involved. Conferences are not a 9 to 5 experience. Expect breakfast and dinner meetups, followed by late night shenanigans. Be part of it. Every moment of the day is to deepen a relationship with someone who can move your enterprise forward. But also be part of the conversation online, be that via Twitter or the conference app. Even if you're not going to the conference, you can be part of the online community.

Research: Figure out who is going.

Who are the organizers? Look them up and memorize their names and what they look like, so when you bump into them at the conference, building that relationship can get you into the next conference at a discount or on the panel alongside your industry mentors.

Who are the speakers and panellist? Which one can help with your goals? Link up on Twitter beforehand and like or retweet some of their posts. Build context so when you reach out via email or introduce yourself at the conference, it's a natural next step in your relationship.

Who are the other attendees? Log into the conference website and find out who they are and what organizations they're with. If you spot someone who could help you achieve your goals, reach out to them and try to arrange a 30 min skype call beforehand. Or else, plan for meetings actually at the conference. Mornings before the plenary are best. Lunchtimes are good but tricky to meet up amongst the food rush. So meet away from lunch and go to lunch together.



Prepare what you're going to say.

You need a 6-word intro. Like "Hi, my name's Andy Narracott. I'm with XXX here in Nairobi". If you make it memorable somehow, it's easier for them to remember you when you reach out via email later.

The next thing you need to have nailed is your 20,000 feet elevator pitch. Keep it really broad in a way that invites them to probe into various aspects of it with follow up questions. If they don't have the time, it could be enough for them to offer their business card and you can follow up via email later.

Make good conversation. Above all else, this is a place to build relationships and make lasting connections. Don't pitch hard, but be friendly and ask about them. Use the mnemonic FORM to guide what things to say if you get stuck. F = Family, O = Occupation, R = Recreation, M = Motivation.

Don't neglect the logistics

Pack a notebook or have a note open on your phone just for the conference. Note down actions and ideas as they come. Your minds going to be buzzing so capture everything before it gets lost.

Pack a battery pack for your phone and keep it topped up throughout the day. The last thing you want to be doing is wasting time charging your phone. And make sure you have data on your phone, so get a new SIM card as soon as you arrive in a new country.

Dress well. Turn up in shorts and a t-shirt and no one will take you seriously. But also not so formal that you're unapproachable. Smart casual is good.

Keep a taxi number or the Uber app on your phone in case you need to get to your hotel urgently for some much needed rest before the next day.

Don't neglect your biology. Conferences are taxing on the body, so try to exercise, join in the early morning yoga sessions, drink a smoothie and eat well. Go out at night for a few beers for sure, but not at the expense of the next day's opportunities at the conference.

Be organized. Study the conference schedule beforehand so you know what you absolutely want to join and when you can schedule side meetings.

During

Hang out in the busy areas.

Get there early and mingle. Head straight for the coffee and ask a fellow delegate "Hey, where're you from?" Use these small encounters to crowd source the best the conference has to offer. So early on in the conference, you might ask everyone you meet "What sessions are you most excited about?" Midway through, you might ask "What's been the best thing



you've seen or heard so far?" or at the end "What's been the highlight for you?" It's a numbers game. Each walk to lunch, each lunchtime, each walk in and out of a session, each bus trip from the hotel or airport, they are all mini challenges to meet someone who could change your social enterprise or your life.

When you've met someone, take their business card and immediately write what you talked about and what you're going to follow up on. If nothing, leave blank.

I'm terrible with names. A little trick which helps me remember is to repeat someone's name as soon as they've introduced themselves. For me, it helps avoid the awkward moment when I bump into them again later on and can't recall their name.

You should be attending the sessions you want to learn more about or because the person you want to meet will be there. Hopefully you'll have emailed/spoken/tweeted/shared with them before so you'll have some context to refer to when you bump into them. You're looking for a quick in and out. They'll be busy, will have another meeting to get to, so you want to be very brief. Give them your 6-word intro and follow up with "Would you be opposed to me sending you an email with a few questions after the event? What's the best way for us to connect?" Do not start blasting questions and holding them up, get their card and take a note on what to follow up with.

As mentioned above, make sure to meet the organizers. Tell them how great the event is and how you're going to encourage people to come next year. Hopefully they'll remember you next year when you ask for that discount or request a spot on a panel.

If your goal is to build your authority on a specific topic, attend the appropriate sessions and be first to ask a question when the Q&A begins. Have your 6 word intro ready and move on straight to the question. Not multiple questions. And never go into your personal history.

Here's some basic etiquette to remember. If you're talking to someone, give them your undivided attention. Don't be looking over their shoulder, at the next person you want to meet or thinking about the next session. Be present and engaged. If you're talking to someone and someone you know is hovering nearby, bring them into the conversation. They'll thank you for it later. But make sure you remember their name, and even better, give them a little intro to the person you're talking to. If you've forgotten the person's name, apologize and say so. No one expects you to remember everyone's name. Then repeat what you were just talking about, and continue with the conversation. If you want to get out of a conversation, thank them, shake their hand, take their card, and continue on.

After

The follow up is the most important moment of the conference. You should follow up with everyone. Make sure you schedule time in the first 48 hours after the conference to review your notes and action points.



Start writing people back within the next week. You can even start this during the conference, if you're settling into a session and a conversation is fresh in your mind, drop the person a quick email, saying how you enjoyed talking and you'll be sure to follow up.

Be very specific in your follow up email. Not just "how do I launch a social enterprise?" but "I saw you did [this], what would you do differently next time?" Or go straight for the follow up call, like "When can we schedule some time to connect? I look forward to having a Skype chat with you about [X]"

Even those people you met but you have nothing to follow up on, still shoot them a quick email, such as "It was really great to meet you briefly. I was the guy that [whatever you talked about]. I look forward to connecting with you next year."

Schedule a follow up email. Use Boomerang [boomerangmail.com], Follow up then [followupthen.com] or something else to follow up on emails. It's totally feasible to follow up with the contact if you've not heard back in 5 days. Try this:

"[Name], I hope your day is going great! Forgive me for emailing you again, but I just wanted to follow up on the email below and see if you might have any thoughts. Consider this no more than a friendly nudge!"

Now go and be a conference ninja!

Remember, never waste a moment. Like any entrepreneur, you're going to fail and learn many times over in these conversations, but you'll get better at achieving your conference goals quicker and with ease. It only takes one conversation to change the whole landscape of your social enterprise. Measure your success by the number of uncomfortable situations you put yourself in. Get out there and make it happen!

I'd love to hear your results of putting these tips into action, or anything you've learned that could help improve this guide. Drop me a line at: andy@findingimpact.com or connect with me on Twitter: @AndyNarracott.

And make sure you come up and say Hi at the next conference!