

How to Enjoy a Convention

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Never pass up an opportunity to go out with a group to eat, especially in favor of gathering with "more important people" that may or may not occur.

Don't get cynical about schmoozing. This IS what the meeting is about and that's not a bad thing. It is common for beginners to feel left out, that they don't know anybody, and that "it's all just a big reunion of people who don't care whether a nobody like me lives or dies." That's true. The secret, though, is that that IS all that it is, and the only reason you feel that way is because you don't know too many people YET. Give yourself some time. Slipping too quickly into the defensive wall-flower frame of mind is sure recipe for prolonging the period in which you feel like you don't know anybody.

Related to this, don't get too turned off by name tag gazing. It is what people do at these things. Yes, people will check yours out, discover that you are nobody and then move on. Some of the folks are real bozos looking for famous people to kiss up to. Don't sweat it. Don't let the turkeys get you down.

Think about this sociologically. You have a gathering of several thousand people from one profession. Most of them work in middle of nowhere places with two colleagues, one of whom they loathe. They spend all year teaching the writings of other people (some of whom are their heroes) to 19 year olds. Some of those heroes are walking around the hotel. Of course they're looking at some name tags.

Alternatively, here you have a gathering of several thousand people in the same profession. Profession and job are among the most common categories for sorting the people in one's world. If everyone around you is in the same profession, you need some other status markers to help you order the crowd. Look at the name tags.

Remember that it's OK to engage people in serious conversations about what they do, what they think about, etc. This may be the only time all year where you don't have to explain what sociology is or that it is NOT the same as social work to the person who says "oh my brother is a social worker."

Don't worry about money—that's what plastic is for. In the end, you are going to spend more than you intended; no use wasting emotional energy fretting about it.

Stay in the main conference hotel whenever possible. The idea of staying with a friend who lives just twenty minutes outside of town is almost a bad one.

Recognize and celebrate the fact that the most important and enjoyable part of the annual meeting is that stuff that occurs OUTSIDE of the sessions.

After you've heard your fourth or fifth poorly presented paper, ask yourself how someone who teaches for a living and talks in front of groups 4 to 8 times a week can fail to ever gotten good at it.

Upon checking in, locate the health club or fitness center in your hotel and see what their hours are. Then look around to see if they have a decent breakfast buffet on one of the restaurants. Next, scan through the index of the program to see if there is anyone whose talk you absolutely don't want to miss. (Keep this list short.)

Draw a little time chart and note where these talks are and when. If you're not doing anything else, you can try to catch them. After this, make a list of all the people you want to say hello to, have a meal with, or meet. These two lists are your agenda for the meeting. Remember that almost everyone else is feeling like they don't know anyone too.

Always remember the first law of socializing: act like a host. This means taking the initiative and introducing yourself to others. It means keeping in mind the people you have met when you meet someone new, even if your interests are a million miles apart, you can always say

"Have you met so and so? You should. I'll introduce you when I see you together." And then, when you do, they'll possibly be grateful for the intro, but definitely remember the service. All of this is based loosely on good network theory: weak ties are all-be one whenever you can.

If you have the opportunity to introduce someone big and small, do it by asking the big person if they've met the small one, not vice versa. It's a wonderfully pleasant way to go against the standard status inequalities.

Be as socially generous as possible. It almost never "costs" anything to invite someone along, bring them into a conversation, introduce them to a colleague, connect them to someone of common interests, etc. and (a) these things are always remembered, and (b) what goes around comes around.

Buy some books.

If you're giving a talk, just Tell us what you did, why you thought it was interesting and what we should remember about what you found put or showed. The point of the talk is to help me decide whether I might want to read your work or not.

Do not read your paper. (Reading a talk version of it is OK.) Do not fight with the organizer over time. Do not be convinced that the audience will be enthralled if only you can get this one last point. Do not edit out whole sections on the fly as you notice time running out.

If you find yourself falling in love with your own prose, exercise caution.

All of these things will serve only to make you look inept, unprofessional, immature, and uninteresting.

Don't join your nutso colleagues in the mad rush to grab books at a discount as the book exhibits close. The behavior of some folks in this situation is truly embarrassing – best not to join them.

Remember, you are going to spend a few days with 3 or 4 thousand people who are, perhaps, better at analyzing the social world than participating in it. Be kind. We're all in this together.