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Convening a conference

Facilitating networking among delegates

This article provides conference convenors and delegates with suggestions to enhance networking by delegates attending conferences. Our suggestions are based on a literature search (which revealed very little); what we have found to work well at the research conferences we have convened; conference evaluations; and our experiences at conferences we have attended.

While research conferences are accepted as opportunities where you will hear of the most recent research, they can be much more than that.¹ Delegates attending conferences can use the opportunity to network with other delegates and with conference speakers, many of whom they might not otherwise get to meet face-to-face. Networking at conferences can be productive for a number of reasons: to meet others working in the same area, to discuss current and future projects in an informal setting, and to establish potential collaborations.²⁻⁴ Networking at conferences is important.

Planning the conference

Tips for convenors

Conference aims and theme

The conference's aims need to be clear and provide the framework for the elements of the conference; from speakers to themes, to program and social events. When deciding on a conference theme, keep in mind which delegates you wish to attract making sure that they can identify the theme as being important and relevant to them. A conference theme provides guidance when selecting keynote and plenary speakers, and helps these speakers to plan the focus of their presentation. It will also allow networking at that conference to focus on a theme and enable informal contacts to be made between delegates with related interests.⁴ If topical and pertinent, a conference theme will attract people and have impact on the discussions throughout the conference, but if too specific or not relevant, may either deter people from attending or be ignored by those who attend.

The conference program

To ensure the program will be pertinent to delegates, establish a conference advisory committee to assist with the program planning. Select representatives of the major delegate groups (eg. researchers, policy makers, funders) who are likely to attend the conference. Selecting representatives who are

well known, have their own networks and have been to other conferences, will greatly assist with identifying leaders in the field who are also good speakers, knowledgeable about the area, and who will participate in networking with delegates. These speakers can contribute to advancing the thinking around the theme both through their presentation and their contribution to discussions and networking at the conference.

Resist the temptation to fit in more papers at the expense of discussion time. A research conference needs to provide a balance of keynote presentations that will generate stimulating discussion among delegates, as well as an opportunity for delegates to present their research to their peers and have the opportunity to discuss their findings with other delegates. Hence it is important to allocate plenty of discussion time to allow delegates to interact with speakers and each other, both during sessions and conference breaks.

Call for abstracts

Promote the call for abstracts as early as possible. Plan to let people know whether their abstract has been accepted or otherwise well before the conference so they have sufficient time to prepare their presentations or posters. To enhance the quality of presentations, provide presenters with information about how to present (*Table 1*). Good quality presentations will encourage discussion and networking with the speakers as delegates will see this research as worthwhile.

Chairing conference sessions

Select chairpersons who have an interest in the area so they can engage in and facilitate discussion. They need to be prepared to ask questions at the end of a presentation to start the discussion. Make sure they keep speakers to time, as this is the most common complaint in conference evaluations. Delegates and subsequent speakers become agitated and may stop listening if the speaker goes over

Table 1. Resources to help enhance your presentation**Prepare and present a paper**

- PHCRIS fact sheet. Oral presentations: preparation and delivery www.phcris.org.au/publications/catalogue.php
- PHCRIS fact sheet. Power point presentations www.phcris.org.au/publications/catalogue.php
- Faisal Kiani postpresentation questions <http://careerfocus.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/332/7545/137?etoc>

Produce a poster

- PHCRIS fact sheet. Design and present posters for maximum effect www.phcris.org.au/publications/pdfs/Fsheet05_Poster.pdf
- Lowcay B, McIntyre E. Research posters: the way to display (1). *BMJ Career Focus* 2005;331:251–2
- Lowcay B, McIntyre E. Research posters: the way to display (2). *BMJ Career Focus* 2006;332:29

time. At best this reduces time for questions, at worst it encroaches on the time allocated for the remaining session speakers or the subsequent break time.

Creating other networking opportunities

Allow plenty of time and opportunities for networking. Proactive strategies include authors standing by their posters during designated break times, informal dinners, a welcome reception, a mentor (someone who has been to conferences) – mentee (first time attendee) system, 'themed' tables at lunch time for informal but focused meetings, and interactive workshops.

There may be opportunities for additional meetings during the conference (eg. breakfast, lunch time, cocktails). Delegates can negotiate this with the conference convenor. Social events such as a welcome reception, conference dinner, farewell lunch, will all provide further networking opportunities.

During the conference**Tips for delegates**

Registering early at a conference will give you time to decide which sessions you wish to attend. If conference abstracts are provided, read them before attending the session so you can start to think about what questions to ask. Stimulate debate. Try to make the questions thought provoking, succinct and of interest to others in the audience. If there is no time to ask your question during the session, catch up with the speaker as

soon as possible. Meeting someone face-to-face does help foster relationships.

Wear your name badge and check it is showing, especially during breaks, so that whomever you may be talking to can see your name. Give them your business card and ask for theirs and then write on the back something about them to remind you of the context of this connection (although marking their card might not be appropriate in some cultures).

Attend interactive sessions where they are available. Workshops are often held before the main conference and can be a great way to not only develop or learn new skills, but also to start networking with delegates whom you will see throughout the conference. Other networking sessions include breakfast meetings, cocktail party, or conference dinners.

Where possible, plan whom you would like to meet. Speakers can be identified when they present so they should be easy to locate later in the conference. Most conference organisers also provide a list of delegates, which is useful as a networking tool. If you don't know many people at the conference, introduce yourself to someone new. Talk to those who are standing alone. You might plan a series of opening questions to ask: 'What is your area of research? How did you get into this field? Are you are presenting here? Tell me about your work'. Most people love talking about their work and appreciate others showing an interest.

If presenting, try to link your presentation to what others have said and to the conference theme. This will help embed your research into the

body of knowledge arising from the conference presentations. Keep to time – this will allow time for discussion, which can be very valuable.

Posters are a key part of any conference and are growing in both numbers and quality. If you are presenting a poster, make sure you stand by your poster when required. As a delegate, make a point of viewing the posters when the authors are present so that you can ask questions about their work. If you can't view all the posters, collect handouts and read them later. They should contain author contact details should you wish to contact them.

After the conference**Tips for delegates**

As a delegate you have probably thought of a number of things you would like to follow up from the conference. Follow up on any contacts you have made. If you have promised to send information or anything else, do so as soon as possible and then make contact to see if these have been received. This will strengthen and maintain contact.

Networking is a necessary part of research, particularly with the push for collaboration in primary health care research. Providing and making the most of opportunities to network at conferences can greatly assist this process.

Conflict of interest: none declared.

Acknowledgment

Thanks to members of the Department of General Practice writing group for helpful suggestions and support. The writing group is an initiative of the Flinders University Primary Health Care Research Evaluation and Development Program, funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

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