

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF SLEEP CONFERENCE MEETINGS

By Tamara Sellman, RPSGT, CCSH

SLEEP 2016 is right around the corner. It may be the first time you attend. Or you may be a veteran who still struggles to maximize your time there. If you've paid your money and made the long trip there, you may as well take advantage of the situation.

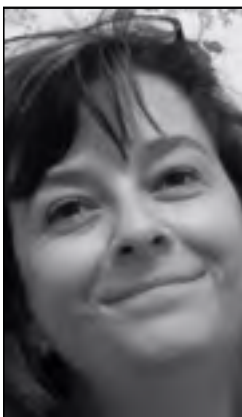
Savvy conference goers know this: while sessions are *valuable*, the conversations between them are *invaluable*. Face-to-face networking with your peers is the number one reason why you should attend any conference.

Education rates a close second, sure. CECs count! But getting to know the people inside your field opens up realities — both good and bad — of working in our specialized healthcare niche.

Our work, especially if it's all at night, can be lonesome and invisible. If we meet and bond with others who do the same thing, we all stand to benefit from their support, ideas, camaraderie, and expertise even during the loneliest shifts at the lab.

If you're attending the Denver event, here are some surviving and thriving tips:

- **Make a plan.** Consult the schedule in advance, highlight all that interests you, then write in these events on a daily calendar to identify any overlap. Prioritize them to prevent making last-minute decisions you may regret later. You can always change your mind.
- **Sample everything.** A conference of this size offers a wealth of networking opportunities. Besides the general sessions, there's the exhibit hall, poster galley, vendor events and meals, bulletin boards, and strategy sessions. Don't ignore them.



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- **SLEEP is for everybody.** Don't limit yourself to technology sessions... you can attend AASM workshops, too. They offer insight into physician and researcher concerns and can help you expand your understanding.
- **Be a loyal member.** *Always* attend the AAST member meeting. The board and committee members comprise the movers and shakers of our field; they can advise on trends in employment, Medicare rules, best practices, and educational opportunities.

Smaller events, like the AAST workshops and state sleep society meetings, allow a more relaxed approach to networking. Try these tips:

- **Get bonded.** At smaller events, people become familiar faster and cluster more readily; it makes it easier to be invited out afterward. Look for chances to get to know your peers better by stepping out for meals or post-conference drinks.
- **Respect the sponsors.** Vendors pay big money to sponsor meetings, many which can't take place without this investment! Let them show you new technologies, even if you're not currently using them (i.e., oral devices).
- **Fill out your forms.** CECs are a key reason why you attend, right? Most live events offer a year's worth. It's easy to skip a visit to the host table, but you must remember to follow through on paperwork so you can receive your credits.
- **It's okay to say no.** It's the board members' jobs to ask for volunteers. If you can't, they'll understand. If you do want to help, introduce yourself! Inventory your strengths and commitment levels, then say "Hi" and offer what you can.

The following tips work for any conference:

- **Be present.** Don't check email or play games during sessions. Do your cellular business between sessions, then put away the smartphone, turning off ringtones and vibrate features. Eye contact cannot happen if your baby blues are trained on a handheld screen.

- **Come calling.** Entrepreneurial technologists should bring business cards to hand out freely. If you're looking for a new job, want to work in public education, or advance yourself by applying the CCSH credential, business cards are essential.
- **Walk with giants.** In our specific niche of sleep medicine, giants literally walk among us: Lee-Chiong, Buysse, Watson, Mignot, Morgenthaler, etc. *Know who they are.* Don't miss opportunities to listen to or meet with them; they're leaders for a *reason*.
- **Give a shout out.** Contact your peers in social media groups and forums before the event to see who's going. Plan to meet them, face to face. This is Networking Basics 101, and it works for *every* person at *every* level in *every* field.
- **Keep your ears to the wall.** The people who speak out and come forward are most inclined to make positive change. At controversial sessions, note the activists in both the panel and the audience. If they inspire you, introduce yourself to them to say thank you.
- **Make a To-Do List.** As you jot down notes, add Action Items to them to follow up on later. These give actionable context for scribbling you may not be able to interpret later. Then... **Follow up.** Turn those Action Items into reality within a week's time.
- **Know your purpose.** Why are you there? To learn everything you can about parasomnia? To meet the local sleep society board and offer to volunteer? To find answers to your burning questions about controversial lab policies? To shake Dr. Dement's hand?

Whatever it is that motivates you to go to a conference, keep your eyes on the prize. If you do so, it'll be easy to rise early and head down those gaudy carpeted halls to the ballroom with its oversized chandelier to get what you came for.

This article is dedicated to Iain Boyle, who passed away on April 21, 2016 in Surrey, BC. Iain was a well-seasoned sleep technologist who I had the privilege and honor to meet and learn from at the Seattle SLEEP meeting in 2015. ❖



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