

The Worryless Conference By GI Expert Ivo Miksa: A few important tips to help ensure a conference doesn't drive you to insanity

SUMMARY OF TIPS:

1. *Register early - save money and have a wider choice.*
2. *Travel light - pack just the necessary stuff.*
3. *Get to know the destination and congress program quickly.*
4. *Join the First Attendees program or find someone local.*
5. *Meet new people - check who is coming and make a wish list of new connections.*
6. *Keep the conversations going.*
7. *Try to make a contribution and bring new information home.*
8. *Don't let the conference drive you insane - have fun!*

Ivo Miksa, an expert in marketing and conference strategy, gives advice on how to enjoy a conference and gain the most experience and knowledge out of it.

Almost every one of us at some point has participated or will participate in a conference or congress. However, the days when a conference was primarily a business trip are long gone. Nowadays, you are expected to contribute to the overall performance of the conference and also return back enriched by the experience. Needless to say, there is no stopping the efficiency train.

Still, there are plenty of ways to have your cake and eat it too. Through greater participation in a conference, an overwhelming feeling of involvement and accomplishment will leave you feeling positively supportive and satisfied. Below you can find a few helpful tips.

Prior to the conference: Never forget to **register in advance**, ideally **as soon as you decide** to attend a conference, while at the same time solve all flights and hotels. You always have a sufficient choice of accommodation and if you choose from the congress offer, you can live among your colleagues and support the budget of the congress. Preferably choose a hotel, which is located within a 10-15 minute walk to the convention centre (a morning walk refreshes the body and mind). Also decide whether or not you intend to participate in the conference program. A lecture or even a poster need time to be prepared.

A month before a conference is an ideal time to **get familiar with the program**. Find the main lectures that interest you and look up where you have your presentation and what technology is available on-site. Organizers usually give you precise instructions on the size and format of poster presentations. Also try to define **what new findings you wish** to bring back from the conference.

Prior to departure: **It's always better to travel light**. Travelling light helps you keep all your needs in order by limiting your travel alternatives. In your hand luggage you should carry only your medicine, money and cards, documents, including insurance, flight tickets and reservations, phone and notebook along with a guide. Either a printed version, an application in a smart phone or even a few printed pages from a travel-tips website are fine. Those of us who are a bit more orderly keep photocopies of documents at home in case of loss. When travelling to lesser-known destina-

tions, it is worth having contact to our office and the emergency number of your travel agency. Such may be the case if the flight is cancelled and you need to rebook it quickly.

All other possessions belong to your main luggage. The main criterion for this simply is in case of lost luggage. The question to ask is can you get around when you arrive at the destination or eventually where can you quickly buy what is needed? Based on my own experience, I know it is possible to even buy a suit an hour before a business meeting.

Hopefully, the flight was comfortable, the landing was smooth and you are on location. After the journey it is good to once **again go through the program and plan** according to your personal liking. Some people prefer a full schedule others prefer to leave gaps and free space for inspirational meetings.

The sooner you go to register and for all conference-related materials the better. This way you can avoid the queues and have extra time to go through the contents of the congress bag and eventually deliver your presentation stress-free for both you and the organizers.

I would highly recommend going through the bag with the congress materials and making your initial selection on the spot. Offer the things you would throw in the trash back to the organizers. There is a greater chance that it will be recycled. Feel free to tear out any particular page or work. It is always better than throwing away the entire brochure. Also, keep in mind that walking around town with a nametag and a conference bag attracts unwanted attention and makes you an easy target for pickpockets.

The registration area is also useful for meeting people when not knowing the place or its surroundings. The registration staff can help you deliver a message and through them you can also schedule a joint meeting for later on.

If this is your first visit to a conference, **check out the "First-Attendees" program**. It covers introductory lessons where more experienced colleagues help you with planning. You will not only find out the recommended lessons, but also where the best coffee is, when the sponsored breakfast is served and other important details such as which workshops should be popular.

If you are not sure about whether you will enjoy the presentation you have chosen, sit near the entrance, so if you eventual leave, it does not disturb the session, or rather wait until someone goes in. It is simply a matter of respect towards the speaker and other participants. Freeing up some extra time is a great way to allow yourself to look around the accompanying exhibitions and identify the stands you wish to visit.

In today's day and age, there is plenty of information at our fingertips and we're only one question away from the answer thanks to the Internet. Some say that, "those who ask too many questions, don't Google enough". Remember most importantly the social aspect of a conference. **Seasoned veterans always have enough business cards** on them (I have even met a man who had a special edition just for one conference). If you are really interested in someone, try to find their biography,

specialization, past jobs and perhaps even their hobbies. You never know, you may find out that you both own the same type of pet.

Most of us, who are forced to be extroverts, are doing likewise. Most people are grateful if you can find common themes to discuss with them. It's best to do so with those who are seated around you at the seminar. Evaluate the speaker, praise the exhibition and immediately you have lots of common topics. Questions like "what did you like" or "what will you remember from today's lectures" also help to **keep the conversation going**.

It is ideal if you manage to combine meeting your colleagues while exploring the surroundings. Simply ask where they are going later in the evening, suggest a restaurant or a bar, or just time to gather as a larger group in the lobby bar before the evening events. The **lobby bar in the main congress hotel** is the place where every important speaker or conference attendee will sooner or later show up.

What helps with social interaction or memorizing people's names and faces? A pocket camera or even the one you have on your mobile phone is the easiest choice. If it is not specifically forbidden, then take pictures of your colleagues, the lectures, intriguing posters, even the town. Take pictures with important speakers and then ask them for an email address or a business card so you can send them the photo (surely they will remember you better for years to come).

Try to contribute: There are different ways to participate in a conference. Anyone and everyone can submit their paper, propose a panel discussion or set up a workshop. There is no better way to meet new people and to open the door to an interesting and friendly environment. Even the process of submitting your paper is beneficial by spending some time trying to express your idea, so others can gain valuable knowledge. It always improves your ability to communicate and helps you sum up and evaluate what you have been doing. Even if your paper is not accepted, you will get feedback from the experts from the Evaluation Committee.

If you are interested in attending a conference, but you do not have the position or budget to visit one, try to make an offer to your boss. By participating in a conference you can create a presentation or give a lecture to colleagues. You can also suggest reducing the cost (cheaper accommodation, alternative transportation forms or taking time off for the conference) if finances are an issue.

Finally, how much is too much? Be aware that you might also want to **spend some time alone**. It is better to leave the conference for a while rather than leaving afterwards with a throbbing head full of a day of seminars and noisy shows. This allows you to arrange your thoughts and better clarify important findings and points that you wish to bring back.

I wish you only the best of experiences with congresses and conferences.

Ivo Miksa