

# 15 Tips from Keith Ferrazzi: Conference Commando

A conference is a huge opportunity to build relationships with extraordinary people, people who might have significant impact on your professional or personal success. To make sure that you maximize the return on your (and your organization's) investment of time and money to attend, you can't afford to be a conference commoner. You have to be a Conference Commando.

**Here are 15 tips to help  
you do just that...**

## #1

### **Remember the 7 P's.**

Proper Prior Planning Prevents Piss-Poor Performance. Military strategists know that most battles are won before the first shot is fired. The side that determines where, when, and how an engagement is fought usually gains an insurmountable advantage. So get focused. Take time weeks before the conference to think through and write down why you are attending. What do you want to achieve? Who do you want to meet? The more clearly you articulate what you want and need from the conference, the more likely you can plan and execute your mission.

## #2

### **Know your targets.**

Get the list of conference attendees somehow—call the conference organizers, ask your friends who are going if they know of other attendees, or whatever it takes. Then go through the list and note those you want to meet. Keep that list with you at all times during the conference (including social events) so you know whom you've met and whom you still need to meet.

## #3

### **Gather intelligence.**

If you want to get to know someone, the first thing you should do is figure out how you can help them. Google them. Of course, their business interests will be most obvious, but do some deeper research to learn about their human sides. Then find your currency for them—your experience, knowledge, contacts, or resources that can make them more successful. And get this: the best part of doing your homework is that it doesn't have to be a secret. When you meet your target contact, say, "I always make a special effort to inquire about the people I'd like to meet." Inevitably, people are flattered. Wouldn't you be?

## #4

### **Strike early.**

Don't wait for the conference to start your networking. A week or two beforehand, pick up the phone and call at least the top three people you want to be SURE to meet. (And no whiny excuses about not being able to find their coordinates. This is the information age!) Begin your conversations now and/or arrange a time for when you arrive at the conference. Can't get past their gatekeepers? Surprise them with a fax or a voice message when they arrive at the conference and save them from spending the night alone in their rooms—most likely

in the very hotel where you're staying! Say, "I'll be downstairs at 8 with a few people for drinks and dinner. Would you like to join us?"

## #5

### **Never attend a conference.**

Well, never just attend a conference. You should be sure to speak, too, even if your name isn't on the program. While keynote speakers are basically given hour-long infomercials for their brands, you can acquire a 30 second commercial for yours just by asking a thoughtful question during Q&A. Stand tall, say your name and what you do, and then ask a great question. Then enjoy your temporary celebrity status after the session. People will be eager to approach you once you've been introduced in a public forum.

## #6

### **Slight the speakers.**

Don't waste time standing in line to meet a speaker after his or her song and dance. There will be so many other brilliant people at the conference; go meet them! If you must meet the speakers, please approach them before their talks, before they have captivated the crowd's attention and adoration.

## #7

### **Get a wingman.**

Just as people lose weight more effectively if they have a workout partner, your start more of the relationships you want if you team up. You and your buddy can provide each other motivation, guidance, and assistance if you'll share with each other your real reasons for attending the conference, whether it's to look for a new job, to fill your sales pipeline, or maybe even to seek a romantic relationship. Wouldn't it be great to show up to the conference with somebody who's actually on your side, who's got your back, who's working with you?

## #8

### **Draft off a big kahuna.**

Get to know some of the most well-known folks at the conference or the conference organizers themselves and hang with them. The important people will rotate by them sooner or later. If you're there, you'll meet everyone who matters. And if you need to reach out to someone who doesn't happen to swing by, ask your new friend—a big kahuna—for an introduction.

## #9

### **Be an info-hub.**

Get really familiar with the conference program. Then pick the brains of conference staff and

anyone else willing to share the ins and outs of what's happening in and around the big meeting. If you're in the loop on the private parties and after-hours special events, everyone will come to you for the goods.

## #10

### **Work hard on break.**

Don't run off to stuff your face or check e-mail between sessions. You should attend to your bagel and BlackBerry while boring speakers like me are blabbing on and on, so when break time comes, you can get out there and do what you really came to the conference to do—meet people!

## #11

### **Hijack a dinner.**

True commandos aren't constrained by the agendas they receive at registration. Arrange a dinner at a special place out on the town you're visiting with people who care about a particular topic that matters to you, or modify a conference meal that's already paid for by inviting specific people to join your table as you meet them during the day. There's usually no assigned seating. And if there is, just tell a conference organizer that you prefer to reassign yourself. They exist to make the conference better for you.

## #12

### **Let your guard down.**

When you engage a target contact, don't you dare talk about the weather! It makes no impact at all. Skip the small talk and dive into the stuff that really matters to you and them: interests, passions, struggles, and greatest needs. You'll have to push yourself to be human and open up enough to get your acquaintance to start sharing. Then listen, listen, listen with warmth and sincerity. And if you are able to help them, do so. Intimacy and Giving are the two keys to making quick connections that jumpstart lasting relationships.

## #13

### **Master the Deep Bump.**

Once you've successfully taken your conversation with a new acquaintance down deep, past the shallow small talk, secure an invitation to reconnect later. Then bump! Move on and meet more people. Don't be like the co-dependent ankle hugger who thinks the first person he meets is his best friend forever.\* You've invested too much time and money in this conference not to take the opportunity to meet many different people. You have a lifetime to build relationships with people at the conference, but only a few days to meet them.

\*Profiles of the Ankle Hugger and more characters you should not imitate on page 5

## #14

### **Take names (and notes).**

Before you conclude the Deep Bump, and move on after making a new acquaintance, be sure to get a business card. Of course, you should quickly scan the card and say the person's name aloud to help commit it to memory. Furthermore, flip over the card and jot down a few words to remind yourself of what you two discussed, any relevant personal details you wish to remember, and, of course, when and why you're going to follow up later.

## #15

### **Follow up or fail.**

Don't wait until you return home from the conference to ping people whose cards you collect. Shoot out follow-up e-mails each night of the event or write them during your flight home. That is, unless you want that same rubber-banded stack of cards on your desk a year from now, which is probably the result of last year's conference if you went as a commoner and not a commando. **Either way, best of luck next time! And you'll need it if you don't remember the 7 P's!**

## Be a Conference Commando.

### More importantly, don't be these people.

**THE WALLFLOWER:** The limp handshake, the position in the far corner of the room, the unassuming demeanor—all signs that this person thinks he or she is there to watch the speakers.

**THE ANKLE HUGGER:** The ankle hugger is a total codependent and thinks that the first person they meet is their BFF (best friend forever). Out of fear, they shadow their BFF the entire conference. You've spent too much money not to leverage the opportunity to meet many different people. So bump! You have a lifetime to build relationships with these people. Collect as many follow-ups as you can.

**THE CELEBRITY HOUND:** This type of person funnels every bit of their energy into trying to meet the most important person at the event. The problem is, if the person they want to meet truly is the most important person at the conference, that person will be on their guard. And maybe even guarded, literally.

A young friend of mine went to see the King of Jordan speak recently and came back ecstatic. He had waited an hour or more, along with 500 other people, for a chance to shake the King's hand. I asked him, "How, exactly, did you benefit from that encounter?" "I can say I met him," he sheepishly replied. I told him that there were probably at least a handful of dignitaries and members of the King's cabinet in that room whom no one knew or wanted to know. Wouldn't it have been better for my young friend to actually have had a conversation with one of them, instead of a handshake with someone who will not remember him beyond the handshake? Maybe he could have struck up a relationship. Instead, he got a photo and a handshake.

**THE SMARMY EYE DARTER:** Nothing will give you a bad rap in less time. Be Bill Clinton instead. If you spend only thirty seconds with someone, make it

thirty seconds of warmth and sincerity. Nothing will give you a good rap in less time.

**THE CARD DISPENSER/AMASSER:** This guy passes his card out like it had the cure for cancer written on its back. Frankly, cards are overrated. If you perform the bump successfully, and extract a promise for a future meeting, a piece of paper is irrelevant. This person gloats over the number of "contacts" he's made. In reality, he's created nothing more valuable than a phone book with people's names and numbers to cold-call.