One Doctor’s 15-year Perspective on Networking at the Annual Meeting

With 13,000 attendees, over a week of courses, social events, and exhibits, the AAN Annual Meeting presents the perfect venue for networking with your peers and peers-to-be in a relaxed but purposeful setting.

For Natalia Rost, MD, FAAN, associate professor of neurology for Harvard Medical School, there’s no place she’d rather be each spring. A veteran of at least 15 Annual Meetings, Dr. Rost first attended as a medical student, urged on by advisors who saw her interest in neurology. Once there, Dr. Rost quickly connected with the newly forming Student Interest Group in Neurology (SIGN) and began affiliations that have lasted her career. “As a medical professional, you want to know who your colleagues are going to be,” she says. “Coming to the American Academy of Neurology for me was basically confirmation that these are the people I wanted to be colleagues with and the profession I wanted to join.”

Now an AAN Fellow and the vice chair of the Academy’s Science Committee, Dr. Rost’s Annual Meeting agenda has evolved from exploring the profession to getting critical updates in her field and connecting with colleagues. And, although Dr. Rost is quick to discuss the professional benefits she derives from the educational sessions (“The main scientific events are really the premier focus at the meeting”), she can’t help but laugh about her favorite parts of the week. “I certainly go for the opening night, because it’s always fun,” she says. “And I love the Neuro Bowl—that’s a kind of Jeopardy game with questions that are highly specific to the field. It’s funny in a kind of nerdy way to see how we all get excited about answering the questions.”

If you’re considering next year’s Annual Meeting (or if you’re at this year’s session as you read this), Dr. Rost has some advice. Citing the broad pool of talent gathered in one spot, she encourages members to use the meeting to form professional networks in subspecialties, to explore opportunities for future employment, or to look for collaborators for particular research ideas. And if you’re a medical student or resident, she’s even more adamant about attending. “The AAN, more than any other society in our field, makes sure there’s programming for the junior people in the field,” she notes, citing the specific medical student activities, consortiums, and research training meetings that are provided for new entrants to the profession. In addition, Dr. Rost wants students and residents to know that junior members of the Academy are well-integrated with more senior Academy members at the meeting. “There’s peer networking, of course, but there’s also opportunity to network vertically,” she says. In her own case, Dr. Rost makes a point of meeting with junior members at the mixers designed for that purpose. The conversations often lead to career tips and follow-up connections after the meeting, as students sometimes ask for logistical advice or request the opportunity to do rotations in her area.

“This meeting is almost a must for medical students and residents if they have any plans to develop their careers in neurology,” she says. As for herself, Dr. Rost doesn’t intend to miss any Annual Meetings, even though her career is now well-established. As she notes, “This is the most important meeting of the year for me because it embodies multiple functions. It’s a source for scientific and educational updates. I’m a stroke neurologist, so it’s the only place to learn those updates. It has also become a big reunion. Most of my friends—beyond just being colleagues, but at this point friends —when we run into each other throughout the year, we say ‘Are you coming to AAN?’ I cannot tell you how much the Annual Meeting has benefited me over the years in terms of networking and professional development.”

**USING PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCES TO EXTEND YOUR NETWORK**

Are you intimidated by networking? One way to jumpstart your process is by attending a conference in your professional area. Whether it’s the Academy’s Annual Meeting or a local get-together of physicians in your subspecialty, it’s hard to replicate the networking power of a professional conference. Here is where you can meet or re-meet people you’ve corresponded with or whose work you’ve been following. It’s where you can ask questions and listen to conversations without preamble, where you can share an idea that’s too new to
put in writing or float the idea to collaborate on research. And if you’re job hunting or considering a career move, professional conferences are a safe place for discreet conversations and timely advice.

But none of these things will happen without preparation from you. For starters, you have to show up. It’s easy to let these events slide past when you’re busy, but face it: Aren’t you always busy? If you don’t make a commitment to yourself by putting the next conference on your calendar, you may be admitting that your career isn’t a top priority.

Once you’ve identified a conference or meeting to attend, think about what you’d like to get from the session. Whether it’s specific contacts or scientific data you’re after, or more of a random harvest of new ideas and connections, planning your approach will help ensure your success. To make this easier, ask the meeting planner for an agenda, a list of presenters and exhibitors, and the attendee list if that’s available. Then peruse this information to help you prioritize your goals for the event. This is also the stage where you might reach out to particular presenters, exhibitors, or attendees in advance, to request short meet-ups where you can introduce yourself or perhaps ask advice if that’s your goal.

If you’re conducting a job search, don’t forget to update your resume. You shouldn’t plan to present this unless someone requests it, but you do want to be ready for that opportunity. Along the same lines, if you’re not currently using business cards, consider printing up something basic with your contact information. This will simplify networking and make it easier for others to reach you later.

At the meeting itself, you can relax a bit. You know which sessions or social events you’re going to, and you may already have some meetings set up. Now you can concentrate on taking everything in, and on getting to know the people sitting next to you. If you came with a friend, remember to split up or else to invite others into your circle. Otherwise you risk looking “closed off” and might not meet anyone new. Whenever you connect with someone interesting, whether it’s a peer or someone more senior or junior, ask for contact information and provide your card. When you return home, your last step in this sequence is to send short emails to the people you’ve met. These can be simple personal notes (“So glad to have met you! Hope we can stay in touch”), more specific requests (“You mentioned upcoming fellowship opportunities—can you tell me who I might contact?”), or offers of assistance (“If I can provide ideas for the grant you’re writing, please don’t hesitate to ask”).

And that’s how it’s done. The conversations you start in a professional meeting or conference become portals to collegial relationships and friendships in the blink of an eye. Now you just need to follow up on occasion and set plans to re-connect at the next conference or meeting. And you thought networking was going to be difficult.