Annual Meeting Networking: Good for All Stages of Your Career

When you head out the door for a professional conference—such as the American Academy of Neurology’s Annual Meeting—how much thought do you give to networking?

That was a trick question. If your purpose for attending is to present information to fellow neurology professionals, learn from others who are presenting, meet up with friends and colleagues, or make the acquaintance of neurologists you haven’t met yet, you’re about to engage in networking without needing to call it that. So in fact, you may be thinking deeply about this important career-building process even if you answered “none at all” to the question above.

MORE THAN JUST JOB SEARCH

That’s the problem with networking: It’s a common term that’s often interchanged with “job search.” And while networking is very important for job search, that’s just one of many purposes for this powerful tool. Here are examples of when networking can be helpful to your career.

Research collaboration. Ever wonder how some people come to form alliances that lead to major research projects or co-authorship on papers? In a word, networking. When one neurologist recognizes that another neurologist is interested in the same question, the seed is planted. Emailing is a good tool, but attending a meeting where the two can meet in person can put the collaboration on the fast track.

Work-life issues. Some things are just easier to discuss with someone who’s been there—and having the conversation in “real time” rather than by email is a key advantage of attending live events. Connecting with others for advice about balancing home and work, for tips on seeking promotions or handling call duties, for guidance on dissecting thorny issues concerning a work visa...these are all examples of topics you can navigate using networking to help you.

Practice tools and tips. What if you’re part of a rural practice and wondering how others handle issues related to patients’ transportation issues? Or maybe you’ve been struggling with reimbursement tangles for certain procedures. These are exactly the kinds of topics you want to discuss with neurologists who have solved similar problems in their own practices. Even a brief and casual encounter can be helpful when you’re talking with someone who’s been in your shoes.

Job search. And of course, there’s job search. If you’re currently in the market for a new position, you should be especially interested in meeting department heads, recruiters, practice managers, or anyone else who can provide good information about different positions, or connect you to the decision-makers in the employment process. Be sure you have copies of your resume or CV along if this is your purpose for attending the event. And if the event is an AAN Annual Meeting, make a beeline for the Neurology Career Center display so you can find out about special opportunities at the conference or register your job search profile for employers to review.

EASY STEPS TO PREPARE FOR NETWORKING

Remember the trick question posed earlier? When you head out the door for the AAN Annual Meeting or other professional gatherings, how much thought do you give to networking? Now you know the answer should be: “I think strategically about networking for each event I attend, and I prepare accordingly.” To make that preparation easier, follow these five easy steps.

1. Determine networking goals for the event. Do you want to meet employers and recruiters? Or others researching in your specialty area? Or...?

2. Review conference announcements to identify speakers, exhibitors, and attendees you would like to meet. Whenever possible, reach out in advance to request a meeting at the event.
3. Prepare materials (printed or uploaded to a cloud server) that would be helpful in your networking. Depending on your goals for the event, this could include CVs, research data, articles you’d like to share, etc. If you don’t have business cards, now is the time to print them, regardless of your networking goals. Go online for vendors of inexpensive, quick-order cards.

4. Plan time for networking. Resist the urge to “be efficient” by flying in the morning of an event and flying out before it ends. Likewise, don’t schedule yourself for back-to-back sessions with no air time. Recognize how rare it is to get so many colleagues together in one space and make use of this special opportunity by providing margin in your itinerary.

5. Relax. Even if your networking goals are quite serious to you, remember that people are drawn to those who are relaxed, open, and friendly. When you’re packing for the event, bring the appropriate business wear but slip in a few casual items as well. You might find that your best networking happens after hours at a local restaurant or on an optional sightseeing tour.

FOLLOW UP TO STRENGTHEN NETWORKING RELATIONSHIPS

One final tip to help you make the best of your networking experiences: Stay in touch. One quick email after the event will help cement a budding relationship, while occasional touch-downs will help it blossom. In the initial email, you can be as brief as “It was delightful to meet, and to learn more about your research. I’m looking forward to seeing the publication this summer.” Another email sent every few months, perhaps with a link to an interesting article, will strengthen the connection. The payback for a very minimal amount of effort? Finding that you know even more people at each event you attend. When you return to next year’s AAN Annual Meeting, you may even find that others are seeking you out.