

convene, confer, convoke

At the International Coach Federation Conference in Denver, Colorado, I came upon something I had not seen before - a format on how to get the most out of the convention. It seems to me that this format contains really worthwhile directions for everyone, including CEOs, on how to get the most out of any convention you're attending. I've supplemented these directions with examples from my own experience and also added some ideas about convention leadership, for those of you who are engaged in that activity.

First, let's define your overall mission in coming to a convention. Webster defines "convene" as "to come together in a body," "confer" as "to compare views," and "convoke" literally as "voice together." So, your object in such a meeting is to come together in a body to compare views and seek the "together voice."

Once you have arrived, the tips from the ICF convention program are helpful:

FOCUS

"Be clear about what you want to get from this experience. List questions you anticipate the conference will answer for you, problems you are trying to solve, people you want to be sure and meet."

My most memorable experience with focus came at a convention of the Chemical Corporate Growth Association I attended at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin in the early 80s. My reason for attending was to hear the Chairman of Diamond Shamrock Corporation, which owned the Federal Yeast plant in Baltimore. After his presentation I approached him and asked if his "Concentrating on Basics" speech indicated that the yeast business did not fit in his corporation's future. He said it might. Thereupon followed a series of meetings with top Diamond Shamrock officials in their Cleveland offices culminating in our acquisition of Federal Yeast, a key to manufacturing and distribution efficiencies which made our yeast business an anchor for corporate profitability well into the 90s.

NETWORK

"Don't huddle all the time with people

you already know—make new acquaintances and learn...Remember your focus subjects and gather a wide range of perspectives."

I used to judge whether time was well spent networking by how many people's hands I could shake and talk to in a given time period. Now my index of success is the meaningfulness and depth of the conversations I have no matter how few.

While I do spend time with acquaintances and remember focus subjects, I always seek to find someone I don't know standing or sitting alone at the coffee hour or cocktail party. At the Denver convention, this procedure turned up a most memorable contact—a Marine turned lawyer turned coach who runs weeklong leadership trips via Harley Davidsons from his base in southwest Kansas to Wyoming.

LEARN

"Take the opportunity to try out a session off the beaten path...Ask yourself: What sessions will stretch me in new directions?"

In the mid-80s I headed a restaurant chain in Texas, a subsidiary of a UK FTSE 100 company. An invitation to an Alex Brown multi-day Baltimore presentation by publicly held restaurant companies arrived in the mail. I decided to go, foreseeing a day we might be spun off by the British. While that day did not come until five years after my departure, the attendance did help me in later acquisition negotiations with W.R. Grace for their Dallas Del Taco chain.

If you tend to define yourself narrowly in terms of your interests, try the opposite. Assume that there is nothing that is not in some way connected to your responsibilities in running your company. Proceeding from there, attendance at what presentation will stretch your capacities for service to yourself and your company?

PARTICIPATE

"Actively participate, ask questions and join in the discussion."

Motivation for participation is important. If it is merely to show that you can



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articulate, are knowledgeable, or can match wits with the presenter, the participation ultimately sounds like an ego trip. If, on the other hand, it comes from sharing relevant experience and who you are, it can be deeply satisfying, and others may find it quite meaningful.

PACE

"The...conference is like running a marathon—you have to pace yourself. You do not have to attend every session...Be sure to maintain your self-care regimen. When you find your energy waning, what will you do to re-energize?"

One of my clients looks forward to the golf game at his conventions, and he doesn't miss it, even when he's chairing industry meetings. He also eats and drinks light to maintain his edge throughout the meetings.

Not trying to plan everything and leaving room for spontaneous activity is helpful in maintaining pace throughout the meetings.

STEP OUT

"...invite folks with similar interests to join you for lunch."

Being open to the “spur of the moment” is important here, too. When it feels right to do it, do it! The informality and the meaningfulness of the discussions, from a business or personal standpoint, are often related.

FOLLOW THROUGH

“Set aside time after you return home to revisit all the tips and ideas that you gathered from the conference and decide which ones to put into action immediately. Follow up with the post-conference contacts that you promised to call or e-mail.”

These are great suggestions for conference attendance. I’ve added a couple more regarding conference leadership.

ASSUME AN INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

Ordinarily, a convention will attract businesses which compete, either directly or indirectly. And yet this collection of businesses has common interests. Whether it’s an industry-wide compensation survey or common labor and personnel problems, both of which I chaired panels on in the bakery industry, or whether it’s the effect of new FASB standards on corporate accounting, or pending Congressional legislation, there are subjects of common interest to all industry members, competitors or not. These are also opportunities for cooperative effort and a resulting common position.

EXPRESS A COMMON ASPIRATION

I gave a keynote presentation to the Virginia Collectors Association this year. The Association has been meeting for forty years and many of the firms compete with each other. Yet most all of them are headed by entrepreneurs or are family businesses, all with aspirations to get to the next level. The purpose of my keynote was to draw out the participants’ aspirations and their ideas how to get there. As participants relaxed and let down their hair, the exchanges became so open and frank that one participant called them unique in the history of the Association. The participants certainly did recognize that discovering their common problems was more important than imagined momentary competitive disadvantage. It turned the convention, a coming together, and the conference, a sharing of views, into a convocation, a “together calling,” or a open discussion of the calling felt by all participants.

As the leader of your business, you owe it to yourself and your associates to get the

most out of industry conventions to benefit your individual business. As a leader in your industry, you owe it to yourself and your industry colleagues to assume an industry perspective and from there, access common aspirations, the “together voice” of all convention attendees.

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