



The  
SpeechImprovement  
Company

# Conquer the Conference

Strategies for Networking, Building Connections,  
and Maximizing Opportunities



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This e-book was assembled from work done by the team of Executive Communication Coaches at The Speech Improvement Company. Visit us at [www.speechimprovement.com](http://www.speechimprovement.com)

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## Introduction: Why This Matters

**Attending conferences can be both an opportunity and a challenge.** Whether you're an executive, an entrepreneur, or a professional looking to learn and grow your network, these events are designed to expand industry knowledge, foster connections, spark ideas, and open doors. But let's be honest—many people find conferences overwhelming, awkward, or just plain exhausting. If the thought of boring presentations, striking up a conversation with a stranger, or navigating a crowded networking session makes you uneasy, you're not alone.

**This book is designed to help you plan your time, engage with the right people, and speak with confidence, even if networking isn't your natural strength.** You'll learn practical strategies to participate in engaging conversations, make memorable first impressions, and build connections that last beyond the event. From planning your approach before you arrive to mastering the art of small talk, you'll gain the tools to make the best use of your time, control the impression you make, and turn any interaction into an opportunity.

By the end of this book, you'll have a set of planning and communication skills that make attending conferences more productive, more enjoyable, and, most importantly, more beneficial to your career and personal growth.

Let's get started!

## What Does Your Handshake Say About You?



By [Monica Murphy](#), Senior Coaching Partner

A handshake is one of the first things a client or colleague notices about you, shaping their perception of your strength, confidence, and ability to connect. Regardless of age or seniority, a well-executed handshake sets the right tone for any professional interaction. As a communication coach, I work with clients to ensure their handshakes convey confidence, approachability, and credibility.

### **The Power of a Handshake**

Dating back to ancient Greece, the handshake has long symbolized trust and goodwill. Over time, it has become a universal sign of respect and connection. In professional settings today, it remains a key nonverbal cue that influences first impressions.

### **The Handshake Spectrum: What Does Yours Say About You?**

Your handshake can project confidence and warmth, or unintentionally signal weakness or aggression. Use this **1-to-5 handshake scale** to assess where you stand:

**Level 1** - Soft touch, limp wrist, curled fingers; **Impression Conveyed:** Perceived as weak or lacking confidence

**Level 2** - Light grip, minimal eye contact; **Impression Conveyed:** May suggest disinterest or insecurity

**Level 3** - Firm grip, good eye contact, brief but controlled; **Impression Conveyed:** Conveys warmth, confidence, and approachability

**Level 4** - Very firm grip, prolonged eye contact; **Impression Conveyed:** Can be seen as domineering or aggressive

**Level 5** - Crushing grip, excessive shaking, or duration; **Impression Conveyed:** Viewed as overly aggressive, possibly intimidating

The ideal handshake falls in the **Level 3-4 range:** firm but not overpowering, with eye contact and a brief but solid grip.

### Tips for the Perfect Handshake

- **Practice Regularly:** Test your handshake with trusted colleagues or friends and ask for feedback.
- **Maintain Eye Contact:** This establishes trust and connection.
- **Be Mindful of Hygiene:** Keep your hands clean and dry. If you tend to get sweaty palms, touch a metal surface (like a doorknob) beforehand to cool and dry your hands.
- **Match the Energy:** Your handshake should reflect the level of enthusiasm you bring to the conversation.

A handshake is more than just a formality; it's a **powerful communication tool** that can set you up for success. **Ensure your handshake conveys confidence, warmth, and professionalism.**

For more on the history and significance of the handshake, check out this article: [The History of the Handshake.](#)

## Creating Conversation at Conferences



By [Kristen Curran-Faller](#), COO, Senior Coaching Partner

One of your goals when attending conferences is meeting and connecting with other attendees.

Building relationships starts with a conversation. Many of my clients are not entirely comfortable striking up conversations with strangers. I am often asked, "What do I say?" I work with clients to create conversations based on the Three Ws.

**1st: Where are you?** Think about where you are physically.

**2nd: What do you have in common with the person?** What do you share with this stranger?

**3rd: What do you say?** The first two W's will help you with what to say.

Here's an example:

You are attending a conference out of state, and you are at a meet-and-greet event.

**1st: Where are you?**

1. At the Conference, in a new setting (hotel, state, city),
2. At an event (dinner, lunch, cocktail hour, or session).



**2nd: What do you have in common?**

1. The conference,
2. Everyone travels to the event;
3. You all have a job related to the industry;
4. You are all enjoying food and drink.

**3rd: What do you say?**

1. "What sessions have you attended?"
2. "Where are you from?"
3. "What company are you with/what do you do?"
4. "Have you attended this conference in the past?"
5. "They have some food; have you tried anything yet?"

Remember, the intent is more important than the content when creating a conversation with a stranger. It's more important that you start a conversation. You need to start conversations with basic questions that anyone can answer.

Take the time to master being direct and offer your unique perspective or analysis and get there quickly.

An unexpected bonus of using brevity is that it helps you stay on time. If you are asked to speak for 45 minutes, instead speak for 35 minutes, leaving time for Q&A or open discussion—or even end early! No one has ever complained about that.



## Networking When You Hate Networking



By [Dr. Cat Kingsley Westerman](#), Executive Communication Coach

True confessions: I'm an introvert. I do not like talking to people I don't know. However, I will be entirely unsuccessful in my profession if I do not meet new people.

For so many professions, meeting new people is crucial to success. And for people like me, networking is a dirty word. So, how can we make networking less painful and more doable?

Attending professional conferences provides an excellent opportunity to engage in networking. Here's a template for networking at conferences even when it's not your favorite:

The first step is to attend a panel, talk, or discussion and PAY ATTENTION. While listening, jot down some interesting ideas you hear the speakers sharing. Plan out what you will say based on the template below. When the session is over, choose one of the speakers, go to the front of the room, and start things up.

Start by briefly introducing yourself. For example, 'Hello, I'm Cat Kingsley Westerman, and I'm just getting into the short-term rental business with three properties.'

Then use **HEC (Headline – Example – Comment)**.

Give them a headline:

**H:** "I found your comments on short-term rentals very interesting."

Then an example:

**E:** "That was a great story about the people who put thought into their interior design and had a 50% bump in occupancy."

Then, a comment:

**C:** "I would like to know if I can have a similar effect by changing the exterior of my property."

Finally, follow with a question:

"What are your thoughts on that? What other advice would you give to someone like me?"

Interactions like this demonstrate that you are smart and well-informed, make the speaker feel good, and create new connections with other smart people in your field. Set a goal for how many people you'll meet at the conference, and watch your network grow!

## Controlling the Impression You Make—Recorded Lesson



What do you want others to say about you when you leave the room?

In this 30-minute recording, [Laura Mathis](#), Executive Communication Coach and [Dr. Dennis Becker](#), Founder and Senior Coaching Partner, reveal the six most frequently selected impressions that leaders of countries and companies worldwide find effective. Plus, you will learn communication techniques that create the impression you make on others.

WATCH NOW

## Speaking Successfully at a Conference Fireside Chat



By [Laura Mathis](#), Executive Communication Coach

A **fireside chat** in business is an **informal yet structured** conversation between a **moderator and a guest speaker** (or panel) at a conference, event, or corporate gathering. Unlike traditional keynote speeches or panel discussions, fireside chats are **engaging, relaxed, and interactive**—almost like an intimate conversation around a fireplace, which is where the term originates.

Of course, speaking in this format may not always feel comfortable. Nerves can creep in between the **lavalier mic, a tight dress belt, and the fear of the unknown**. As coaches, we've helped hundreds of professionals prepare for fireside chats, and here are our top **tips for success**:

### 1. Embrace the Conversational Format

Unlike formal speeches, fireside chats **should feel like a candid conversation** between you and the moderator (and the other speakers if appropriate).

### How to Prepare:

- **Ditch the script.** Instead of a full-page speech, keep an index card with key points or hard-to-memorize data. Ideally, you have no notes.
- **Trust the flow.** There's no need to memorize word-for-word—let the conversation develop naturally.
- **Pivot when needed.** A great moderator will **shape the conversation**, but if an important point hasn't come up, don't be afraid to steer the discussion toward it.

**Pro Tip:** Moderators have the toughest job—they act as **conductors of an orchestra**, guiding the discussion's rhythm and tone. The best ones will make it effortless for you! Meet them in advance to get in alignment.

## 2. Engage with the Listeners

Fireside chats often include **Q&A segments**, making them **more dynamic and interactive**.

### How to Prepare:

- **Predict questions.** Think through likely questions and prepare a **loose 30–60-second response** for each.
- **Prepare for the tough ones.** Anticipate the **questions you hope you don't get** and have a clear, concise answer ready.
- **Stay composed.** Suppose an unexpected question catches you off guard. In that case, **pause before answering**—silence for a few seconds is better than rushing into an unclear response.

## 3. Be Relaxed Yet Informative

Fireside chats are **professional but casual**—a balance of credibility and approachability.

### How to Deliver Well:

- **Smile, maintain good posture**—but don't be stiff.
- **Use quick stories or examples** to illustrate key points. (Plan a few)
- **Could you keep it simple?** Make complex topics more **accessible and engaging**.

**Pro Tip:** The best fireside chat speakers create a **"behind-the-scenes" feel**—offering insights that go beyond rehearsed corporate messaging.

## 4. The Biggest Rule of Speaking at a Fireside Chat

### Don't Over-Speak—Make an Impact Quickly:

- Get to the **point quickly**—be **crisp, clear, and compelling**.
- **Use a purposeful pace**—avoid rambling, and keep responses within **60 seconds** before passing them back to the moderator or a fellow speaker.
- Allow space for **moderator engagement and co-speakers**—a good fireside chat flows like a great dinner conversation. Don't ramble or repeat yourself due to nerves or being distracted by the setting, such as media photographers or 50 people nibbling croissants.

## Final Thoughts

A well-executed fireside chat creates a **genuine, insightful, and engaging experience** for the speaker and the audience. And let's be honest—**no one ever complained about a lack of long PowerPoint slides** in this format. So, **smile, enjoy the experience, and embrace the conversation!**



# Maximize Your Time Investment: Pro Tips for Professional Conferences



By [Robin Golinski](#), Executive Communication Coach

Attending a professional conference can be a powerful way to expand your network, showcase your expertise, and open doors to new opportunities. However, the benefits don't come automatically. The key is thoughtful preparation. Here are actionable tips to ensure you maximize your time and investment at your next conference:

1. **Strategize Your Connections. Make a Target List:** Review the attendee and speaker lists before the conference. Identify the people you want to connect with—aim high! This could include industry leaders, potential mentors, or collaborators.

**Research and Prepare:** Learn about their work, challenges, or interests. This preparation will enable you to ask insightful, specific questions demonstrating your knowledge and genuine interest.

2. **Craft Your Conversation Starters. Unique and Relevant Questions:** Think beyond clichés. Prepare questions that allow others to share their expertise and shine. For example, instead of asking, "What do you do?" try, "I saw your recent work on [specific project/topic]. What inspired that direction?"

**Be Ready to Listen:** While preparation is crucial, listening during sessions or conversations can help you craft more thoughtful, relevant questions.

3. **Polish Your Personal Presentation. Dress with Intention:** Your attire communicates before you speak. Choose clothing that aligns with your professional goals and sends the right message.

**Add a Conversation Piece:** Consider a unique accessory, such as a printed tie, a bold scarf, or a lapel pin. These small touches can spark easy conversations and help you stand out.

4. **Be Prepared to Speak 'The Language of Benefit'. Focus on Value:** Be ready to articulate how who you are or what you do is beneficial to the person you're speaking with. Why should they listen to you or care about what you're saying? If you can't find a reason, it's best not to engage.

**Example:** Instead of saying, "I'm a software developer," you could say, "I help companies streamline their operations by creating custom software solutions that save time and reduce errors." This reframes your role in terms of the benefit it provides.

5. **Be Strategic in Sessions. Prioritize Key Sessions:** Aim to attend talks by the most well-known speakers or on topics that align with your goals. Arrive early to secure a good seat and prepare to ask a thoughtful question.

**Have Backup Questions:** If someone else asks your question, have a second one ready. This ensures you're still able to engage meaningfully.

6. **Make Every Conversation Count. Wrap Up with an Action:** Don't let the conversation end without a next step. A simple but effective close is, "May I connect with you on LinkedIn?" Set a specific follow-up, like sending an article or scheduling a call if appropriate.
7. **Remember: It's Just the Beginning. Focus on the Long Game:** Conversations with important leaders are just the starting point. When handled well, they can lead to future engagements.

**Keep It Simple:** Avoid launching into a full business idea or plan during an initial interaction. Instead, offer a teaser and ask for another meeting.

**Build Credibility and Trust:** Earning trust takes time and effort. Use the face-to-face opportunity at conferences as a powerful foundation for deeper relationships.

8. **Maximize ROI: The Power of Preparation.** Conferences require significant investment in time, energy, and money. To make the most of it: **Plan Who to Meet:** Don't leave networking to chance.



Prepare What to Say: Tailor your questions and conversations to stand out.

Think Ahead: From your attire to your follow-up actions, intentionality ensures you leave a lasting impression.

With thoughtful preparation, you'll turn a simple conference into a launchpad for meaningful connections and career growth. Don't just attend—excel!



# Unlocking the Power of Conferences: Turning Chaos into Opportunity



By [Dr. Chas Womelsdorf](#), Executive Communication Coach

Conferences can be transformative experiences—places where new partnerships are forged, ideas take flight, and energy is reinvigorated. Yet, all too often, they devolve into chaotic whirlwinds of missed opportunities and scattered schedules. Ironically, the best moments often happen in the quiet corners: hallway conversations or impromptu meetups in empty banquet rooms after the main events.

What if those "best parts" could become the focus instead of the afterthought? When approached as collaborative team-building opportunities rather than individual marathons, conferences can become game-changers—for the company, the team, and the individual. Here's how you can prepare your team to thrive:

## 1. Pre-Conference Game Plan

Before the travel frenzy begins, gather your team for a strategy session. This isn't just a logistics meeting—it's about aligning individual objectives with team goals. Keep it relaxed, perhaps over lunch or dinner, and encourage open sharing.

- **Set clear goals:** Ask everyone to identify one company-wide objective (e.g., scouting for future operational challenges) and one personal goal (e.g., making five new connections or asking a question in every session).
- **Form sub-teams if needed:** If your group exceeds eight members, consider breaking into smaller units to ensure better collaboration and accountability.

This approach ensures your team enters the conference with clarity and purpose, ready to amplify each other's success.

## 2. Practice Makes Perfect

Confidence and preparation go hand in hand. Dedicate 15 minutes daily for the team to practice key elements of their conference roles.

- **Keep it concise:** Each participant gets five minutes to rehearse something specific—whether it's their presentation introduction, an elevator pitch, or an answer to a likely panel question.
- **Collective feedback:** Use the remaining time to provide constructive input and brainstorm strategies.

This routine not only sharpens individual skills but fosters a shared sense of accountability and camaraderie. Plus, it often leads to creative, collaborative solutions that align with team goals.

## 3. Plan for the Unexpected

Conferences are notorious for throwing curveballs, from missed connections to overwhelming schedules. Equip your team with tools to handle these situations with grace:

- **Identify common challenges:** Discuss scenarios that might arise (e.g., feeling stuck in an unproductive conversation or needing to gracefully exit a session).
- **Create a support system:** Establish communication channels or even subtle signals for requesting help in real time. This can range from group chats to pre-determined hand signals during networking events.

By preparing for the unexpected, your team becomes a resilient unit, ready to tackle any obstacle.

## Final Thoughts

Conferences don't have to be chaotic or draining experiences. With the right preparation and a focus on team synergy, they can be powerful catalysts for growth and innovation. By aligning goals, practicing together, and strategizing for the inevitable hiccups, your team can leave each event not just inspired, but transformed.

## Speaking Faster or Slower: Is One Better than the Other?



By [Dr. Dennis Becker](#), Founder, Senior Coaching Partner

The immediate answer is yes. One of these is better than the other. As a speaker it's important to recognize that the normal business presentation is delivered at approximately 185 to 200 words per minute. The normal human brain is able to process information at 4 to 600 words per minute.

Now, we're not suggesting that you try to speak 500 words a minute in order to occupy your listeners brain and concentration. However, it is very appropriate and very helpful for you as the speaker to change the rate of speed at which you are speaking to fit, the importance of the topic you are speaking about. A good speaker knows the connection between the value of the words being spoken and the speed at which they are spoken. So, is one better than the other?

Absolutely. It's up to you as an effective speaker to know which is more effective and why. That is where a good coach can be very helpful.

## How to Be a Dynamic Panelist



Are you a panelist or moderator at an upcoming conference?

Watch this short video by Executive Communication Coach [Melody Elkin](#), and learn how to be a ***dynamic panelist***.

WATCH NOW

## The One Thing You Must Do Before Attending a Conference



By [Jeff Turner](#), Business Manager

If there's one game-changing tip I've learned about networking at conferences, it's this: **Download the LinkedIn app and keep it on your phone.** You can [download it here](#).

Why? Because in just a few seconds, you can discreetly look up anyone you meet—without them knowing, even if they are standing next to you.

See a familiar face or name on a badge but can't place them? Look them up.

Need more than just a name on a badge to start a conversation? Look them up.

Unexpectedly find yourself standing next to a group of senior executives? Look them all up.

With a quick search, you'll instantly know:

- **Who they are & what they do**



- **Where they work** (and where they worked before)
- **Where they live**
- **Where they went to school**
- **If you have mutual connections or shared interests**

This kind of intel transforms small talk into meaningful conversation. Instead of generic chatter, you can ask insightful questions, mention shared contacts, or reference something relevant from their background.

It's a simple, powerful, and completely free way to make your networking more effective.

So before you head to your next conference, make sure LinkedIn is ready to go. You'll thank yourself (and maybe me?) later!

## How to Be Productive and Impactful at a Conference



By [Monica Murphy](#), Senior Coaching Partner

For many professionals attending a conference, you're not on stage as a panelist or keynote speaker. Instead, your time is likely spent in a series of **30-minute meetings**, introducing yourself and your company while exploring potential connections. Often, you may not even have the chance to attend the main conference presentations.

This dynamic creates both a **unique opportunity and a challenge**: how do you maximize the impact of those brief, high-stakes conversations while effectively representing your firm?

Conferences offer much more than networking—they're a powerful opportunity to **sharpen your communication skills, build credibility, and position yourself for growth** within your firm and the industry. As a communication coach, I outline key strategies for success that go beyond the surface.

While many dread these meetings or see them as boring and repetitive, I encourage you to look at them differently: **think of them as a laboratory**—a place to practice, refine, and build the muscle memory that strengthens your confidence for other high-stakes meetings.

Here are a few **top-level tips** to help you prepare, make the most of your time, and build lasting experience.





## 1. Prepare Strategically for 30-Minute Meetings

Success at a conference **starts before you even walk through the door**. Preparation ensures that your time in those short meetings is **productive and leaves a lasting impression**.

- **Research Attendees and Objectives** – Know **who you're meeting, what their firm does, and how they might align with your firm's goals**. Preparation—not perspiration—gives you confidence and allows for more meaningful conversations.
- **Nail Your Company Pitch** – In **two minutes or less**, deliver your company's story. What makes you unique in the market? What kinds of deals make you stand out? Highlight key areas of focus. Be bold! **Record yourself and listen back** to ensure you're including the most compelling points and delivering them with confidence.
- **Come Ready to Listen** – Prepare thoughtful questions that **show genuine interest in the other person**. Great communication is as much about listening as it is about speaking.

## 2. Make the Most of Brief Interactions

With only **\*\*30 minutes—or less—\*\***it's critical to be intentional and focused.

- **Stay Present and Engaged** – Avoid overloading the conversation with too much detail. Be concise, relevant, and **actively listen** to the other person's responses.
- **Use Nonverbal Communication** – A firm handshake, an **opening smile**, confident eye contact, and open body language reinforce your professionalism and make a strong first impression. **Aligning your nonverbal and verbal delivery is crucial, as we often listen with our eyes**.
- **Project Verbal Confidence** – Your **voice is a powerful tool**. Use vocal inflection to emphasize key points, maintain a strong and steady volume, and **slow down your pace** to convey clarity and authority. These small adjustments build trust and ensure your message is heard.

## 3. Build Credibility, Even Without a Stage

Conferences are a **proving ground**, even if you're not presenting. **Use every interaction to build your professional brand and strengthen your firm's reputation**.

- **Represent Your Company's Ethos** – The way you communicate reflects **not just your personal professionalism but also the firm's values**. Align your messaging with the culture and strengths of your organization.

- **Be a Connector** – If the opportunity arises, **offer to connect others or share helpful insights**. Being a connector **positions you as a team player** and someone who adds value beyond the immediate conversation.

This mindset positions you as a **thoughtful communicator and proactive leader**, qualities essential for success within your firm and the broader **industry**.

By treating conferences as an opportunity to **refine your skills and build connections**, you're **investing in your career and your firm's future**.

## About Us



Since 1964, the professional Speech Coaches at The Speech Improvement Company have touched more than a million people around the world. We are a woman-owned business and the oldest speech coaching firm in the United States.

We support an international clientele including Fortune 500 executives, business professionals, politicians, professional athletes, entrepreneurs, and private individuals to strengthen their communication skills. We work with leaders of countries, companies, and people throughout organizations. Our coaches are formally educated at the graduate level or beyond in all aspects of human communication and cultural understanding. We have both the educational background and the real-world experience to identify speaker strengths, uncover areas of need, and evoke behavioral change.

To date, we have written 13 books on communication and are published in five languages. We have instructed at Harvard University, MIT, and other world-class institutions as well as conducting pro bono work for non-profit and community organizations. Our coaching team attends monthly development days to ensure they are apprised of the latest research, theory, tools, and trends related to human communication.

### What Topics We Cover

Our focus is on helping clients strengthen communication skills for application in both business and personal settings. While each client interaction is unique, our most popular areas of focus are in the following 5 areas:

- Leadership & Management
- Public Speaking
- Sales Communications
- Customer Service Excellence
- Accent Modification

### Our Clients

We've delivered group workshops and one-on-one executive coaching to thousands of clients from the world's largest pharmaceutical firms to mid-sized retailers, to small manufacturers and tech startups. They all share one challenge: the need to speak clearly, persuasively, and with confidence in any setting. Some of our well-known clients include:

Pfizer  
Goldman Sachs  
Apple  
Bose Corporation

Reebok  
Kaiser Permanente  
The Nielsen Company  
McKinsey & Company

Mass General Hospital  
Bank of America  
Takeda  
The Boston Red Sox



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