

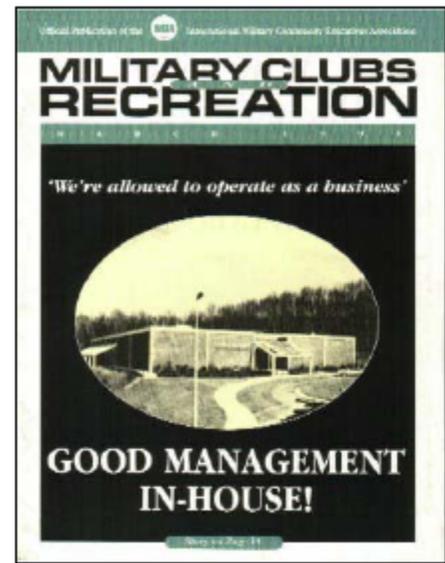
Tricks of the Trade Show!

...how to get the most out of your next meeting

Will you ever go to another trade show? If so, follow these 13 steps to make it the most valuable show you ever attend.

Originally published in *Military Clubs and Recreation*, March 1993.

by **Kent Cummins**
Contributing Editor



Copyright © 2001 by Kent Cummins. All rights reserved. This document may not be redistributed or copied in whole or in part without the express written consent of Kent Cummins.

Any time you leave your job and daily routine, you and your organization incur costs. Most meetings, workshops, conferences, conventions, forums, seminars and trade shows require an admission/registration fee, plus the inevitable costs of travel, lodging, meals and incidentals while away from home.

Perhaps even more significant, for many hard-charging “Type X” managers, is the cost in terms of time away from the office. Phone calls aren’t answered; the mail stacks up; decisions are delayed.

Given the significant investment required in both money and time, why do people attend trade shows and other meetings?

WHY GO?

There are lots of reasons, of course. Among them:

1. Command Pressure

If your boss expects you to attend a show, you’re probably going to go—regardless of personal preferences or cost considerations.

2. Peer Pressure

If your counterparts in other services and/or other installations are going to be there, you probably need to be there, too.

3. Job Pressure

One of the most important benefits of getting away from the job for a few days is the safety valve it provides for stress. Most meetings are held in locations that encourage relaxation, entertainment or both.

4. Idea Supermarket!

Most well-planned trade shows are a treasure trove of ideas which you can use when you get back to your job. Just one good idea can more than pay for the trip!

5. Networking

It usually helps to discuss problems with other people who may have different ideas and approaches to their solution. Often, it helps just knowing that you’re not alone out there!

6. Personal Growth

Some people attend shows in search of a better job, but most everyone has the potential to learn and to “get their batteries recharged” while attending a trade show.

BOONDOGGLE ALERT!

Since many meetings are held in exciting places like Hawaii, Las Vegas, or Walt Disney World, there is a perception on the part of some supervisors that attendance is some sort of boondoggle. In fact, one military manager wouldn’t include the official conference materials in her request for orders, since they showed pictures of bikini-clad girls on the beach!

Of course, if you don’t plan your trip carefully, it could just wind up *being* a boondoggle! In other words, your organization would be spending money solely for your personal enjoyment.

However, if you carefully plan your trip, considering the tips provided here, you can gain the maximum benefits of attendance and ensure that the trip is cost-effective.

Yes, you will still have to incur the costs of money and time, but those costs can be an investment rather than merely an expense. And the return on that investment should more than pay for the trip.

A DOZEN IDEAS

1. Clear the decks at home.

If you're an effective manager, you have learned to cross-train personnel, delegate tasks, and organize projects so that things won't fall apart while you're gone.

Some insecure managers feel that they must always be available, that they are absolutely essential at all times. But what if you have an accident, or get seriously ill?

The best managers manage to learn how to be invaluable without being irreplaceable. It is often said that the test of a truly effective manager is how well the operation continues when he or she is gone.

2. Plan your trip in advance.

If you travel frequently, you probably already have a mental checklist: make hotel reservations, get traveler's checks, change answering machine message, etc.

If travel is not a frequent activity for you, it is an excellent idea to start making "TO DO" lists a week or more in advance, getting tasks checked off as early as possible to avoid last-minute panics. Some frequent travelers have a complete set of duplicate toilet articles (sample sizes) already packed in a separate travel case, so they don't ever forget their toothbrush!

3. Determine prioritized schedule of events before departure.

Obtain an advance itinerary and schedule of events if at all possible, to enable you to set priorities in advance. What is your most important objective in attending the meeting?

Is your most important objective to meet with certain people, to find solutions to certain problems, or perhaps to sell yourself or your ideas? If you study the schedule in light of your objectives, you can plan those activities and times that will be most important to you.

4. Take lots of business cards!

There will probably be lots of people who may want to contact you after the show. Make it easy for them by taking plenty of business cards.

Incidentally, with instant printers able to produce business cards in 24 hours for less than \$20, there's no excuse to give cards with the wrong title, address, or phone number. Order new cards regularly, and *throw the old ones away!*

5. Plan how you will collect other people's business cards.
Let's face it: you're going to meet people whom you want to remember. The easiest way is to ask for their business cards; however, business cards are easily lost or misplaced. And if you collect a lot of them, you may not remember why!

One strategy is to mark the back of the card with a brief note of why you want to remember that person. Just explain, as you take out your pen, "Let me make a note so I'll remember that you want a copy of my SOP." You can also jot down a word or two to further help you remember them. ("tall . . . from Ohio," etc.) If someone doesn't have a card, have them write their name, address and phone number on the back of one of yours. But put a big "X" on the face, so you don't accidentally give it to someone else!

Some people carry their own cards in one pocket and place other people's in a different pocket, to keep them separate. At the end of each day, you can transfer the cards you've collected to your briefcase, organizer, or envelope.

6. Always carry a couple of pens with you.
Ballpoint pens are cheap, so don't be caught without one. You'll need them to fill out forms, sign checks, make notes about the meeting. and loan to people who don't have them! You can even get inexpensive pens with your name and phone number of them, so when they are "borrowed" they will serve as a special business card.

Offering someone a cigarette (or a light) used to be a common, socially-acceptable and effective gambit for "connecting" with a new acquaintance. Now that smoking is less acceptable in social situations, you can sometimes make the connection with a Bic pen instead of a Bic lighter!

7. Carry a pocket notebook with you at all times.
Okay, you're carrying a pocketful of pens—but you need something to write on when you get a brilliant idea, or hear something that you want to remember, or think of something that you need to take care of upon your return. You can also make notes of reimbursable expenses, before you forget.

A pocket notebook is also an inconspicuous way to take notes while watching the keynote speaker, or participating in a workshop. Some people prefer a small tape recorder, but many meetings have rules restricting their use. Also, it takes much longer to review hours of audio tapes than to flip through pages of written notes.

8. Don't pick up everything available!
At most trade shows, nearly every booth has something which they want to get into your hands. After all, it can be an effective way to get you to slow down and notice their booth.

Research indicates, however, that very few people actually go through all the stuff they've picked up once the show is over—despite the best of intentions.

So avoid the urge to fill up a shopping bag with "stuff." Be selective, and you're much more likely to actually use what you get.

9. Pack an empty bag!

Despite the advice to be selective, you're probably going to go home with more than you brought to the show. There will be handouts, catalogs, souvenirs—perhaps some books or products that you couldn't resist because of special “show prices”—not to mention gifts and mementoes for those you left behind.

Savvy travelers often pack a collapsible bag in their luggage, so they'll have a convenient way to bring home all the loot!

10. Plan to lose your luggage!

Very little luggage actually gets lost . . . particularly not if you have name and address labels both inside and out on each box and bag. But a remarkable number of bags seem to be temporarily misrouted or delayed, usually for just a day or two.

Nevertheless, if you carefully packed everything into your checked baggage so you wouldn't have to deal with awkward carry-ons, you may be devastated when your important “stuff” doesn't arrive the same day you do!

Take a tip from seasoned travelers, and carry at least the minimum stuff you'll need on the first day with you: a few basic toiletries, change of underwear, registration materials.

11. Go to almost everything.

It is always surprising how many people invest money and time attending a meeting or trade show and then party so late that they miss many of the morning activities. Or they go sight-seeing and miss afternoon activities. Or they get distracted in the lobby, and miss an important speaker.

Yes, you want to relax, but don't forget your primary reasons for being there. Sometimes the least promising activities turn out to be the most valuable.

12. Don't forget to eat and sleep!

Everybody develops a rhythm which—when followed— keeps them at peak efficiency. By now, you probably know whether you are a “day person;” “night person;” or what. Try to avoid the tendency to overeat, skip meals, avoid normal exercise, or change your established sleep patterns.

If you are going to be flying between time zones, set your watch to the new time zone and start adapting even before you leave . . . it will reduce “jet lag;” and make you more efficient. It will also make your trip more enjoyable!

13. Make time for an after-action report.

(Okay, so it's a Baker's Dozen!) Chances are, you should report to somebody about your trip. And it's to everyone's advantage to realistically analyze the benefits of attending. (Do you want to be approved or go again next year?)

Also, you have a temporary increased credibility when you come back from a professional meeting. Your supervisors also want to feel good about sending you, so they are more likely to receive new ideas favorably when you return.

But the glow will wear off quickly, so make the report right away. (How 'bout on the plane during the return trip? That's when this article was written!) ✨