

Zen & The Art of Legal Networking

INSIGHTS & COMMENTARY ON RELATIONSHIP BUILDING WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL LAWYERS NETWORK

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Planning a Conference Abroad

A significant part of my job is planning our conferences, and we have four of these a year. Some people might consider me a party planner, but when you work for a network like ours, conference planning is much more than that – the purpose of our conferences is to facilitate relationships, and I need to plan each part of the conference around that goal.

Plus, I need to try to make everyone happy. Guess how often that happens?

Sometimes, facilitating relationships means pushing our delegates past their comfort zones (ie bike riding through rice paddies in Vietnam or sending them to a fish spa in Singapore) because it makes them feel a shared connection that leads to talking, laughing, and forming a relationship.

As I mentioned, we have four conferences a year – the Asia Pacific Meeting, the Annual Meeting, the European Regional Meeting, and the Americas Regional Meeting. As you might guess, anywhere from 2-4 of these are held outside the United States and that presents some interesting challenges, as well as offers some rewarding experiences.

I thought I'd share some of the lessons I've learned with you, because while these lessons were learned while planning conferences, they can also be applied to business done abroad as well.

Lessons

1. **Hire a local events planner or DMC (Destination Management Company):** We normally go with a recommendation from the hotel that we're using (which comes recommended from our local host firm). Events planners can help you get access to things that you wouldn't be able to get on your own, they work with a lot of groups so their experience with international business is usually pretty good, and they can act as the onsite liaison so you can concentrate on handling your delegates directly, rather than dealing with smaller details.
2. **Google:** If you're traveling to a country that you are really unfamiliar with, it's a good idea to spend some time doing research on the internet to find out what some of their customs and cultural concerns might be. For example, in Vietnam, women still dress fairly conservatively, so it wouldn't be appropriate to be dressed in a miniskirt and low cut blouse (although hopefully if you're doing business anywhere as a woman, you're not wearing that!). But you may learn something important, like, when entering a temple, women must have their shoulders covered. This would be useful for delegates and their companions to know in advance of the conference.
3. **Something will always go wrong (yes, always):** Someone told me this a few years ago, and it's true – no matter how detailed you are, and how many times you check things, something will inevitably go wrong or fall through the cracks. You've got to be able to take a deep breath, handle the snafu with grace, and have a sense of humor about it. If you just get mad and frustrated, you're less able to fix the issue effectively, and it's far more likely your delegates will see that something is wrong.
4. **Do like the locals do:** When we plan conferences, we have half day business sessions only. This isn't because no one likes to work – it's because the best networking happens when the group is doing something new and unusual together or sharing a meal. We like to do something unique to the city we're visiting when we're there because it creates great memories for the group and gives them shared experiences that bond them. We're fortunate to usually have a host firm in the city we're visiting, so we can share the program with them to ensure that it's showcasing the best that their city has to offer.

Additionally, at least try the food wherever you're traveling! Sure, we've had complaints that the food was too unusual or scary, but it's all part of the experience and it gives everyone something to talk about.

5. **Be open-minded:** I can't tell you how many times I've heard people tell me that they like seeing how things are done in other cultures, only to then insist that the people there do things their way. And this follows along with the next point...
6. **Have a sense of humor:** As I mentioned, things will go wrong, and you need to roll with them. If I'd stamped my feet and gotten frustrated over the things that have gone wrong, the delegates would notice and that would affect both their impression of me, and of the conference. Plus, I have a better time when I'm rolling with the punches.
7. **Communication is key:** I like to do things in a certain way, but not everyone does things the same way. So I generally tell the events planners, in a nice way, what I need. And to hold my end of the bargain, I always deliver my answers to their requests either immediately, or by the

agreed upon timeline. Things will still fall through the cracks, or miscommunications because of cultural differences will happen, but if you keep a regular, open dialogue with your counterpart, things will be much smoother overall.

8. **Time Differences:** Always be mindful of the time differences, in two ways. One, when planning the meeting – sometimes time differences can be an asset. If I'm planning a conference with someone who has an accent I have difficulty understanding, email is a great way to explain things and lay them out. It also gives you a written record of all requests you've made and conversations you've had. However, it can also be a problem if you need something dealt with immediately, and everyone in the host city is asleep. The other time you need to be mindful of time differences is when you're looking at your delegate list and planning the first few days' activities. With our group, they're all lawyers and it's not easy for them to take extra time away from the office just to acclimatize to the time changes. So if a large percentage of the group has far to travel, it's important to take that into account and not make the first day's activities too demanding. We often host our first evening's reception at the hotel so that the delegates can come and go as they please, and they don't have far to go.
9. **Plan for weather:** Always have a weather backup for outdoor activities. Always. And check the forecast before you go. I thought Vietnam would be hot and humid. But it was pretty chilly, and I was always cold. I'd checked the forecast, but it was far less humid than I expected, so it didn't feel as warm as it could have. I've also heard from more than one host law firm "It never rains this time of year!" as we're watching a downpour outside - you can never predict or control the weather - though the delegates know I'm so detail-oriented, that they often ask me why I didn't do a better job ordering up sunny weather.
10. **Location is everything:** Unless you're planning to spend the entire time in the hotel in business sessions, the delegates will want to get out and see the city. We've learned that finding a nice hotel, in a central location that lends itself to walking around the city, makes our delegates happiest.
11. **Switch it up:** And finally, we've found it's very important to switch things up. If you have 5 people or 525 people, you'll have that many opinions and interests to try to meet. So you don't want to spend 100% of the time at local art museums - a few people will be happy with this, but the overall group won't be. If you alternate the kind of activities the group does, each day feels fresh and new and you'll lose fewer people by the last day.

I'm sure there are many other tips for planning meetings abroad - what have been some of the lessons you've learned?

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