Meeting (to move) up

Scientific conferences give new faculty members a chance to meet the leaders in their field and to give themselves some much-needed exposure. Kendall Powell works the room.

It was a rookie mistake. In April, just months after establishing his own lab at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Leonard Foster strolled through the booths at the Keystone Symposium on Proteomics and Bioinformatics in Keystone, Colorado, chatting up friendly vendors during a break.

"I was slammed with meetings for two weeks after that, with people trying to get me to buy equipment," he recalls. He is wiser now to the different behaviour needed by a postdoc trawling for free T-shirts and by a new investigator hoping to make the right connections.

Attending scientific conferences early in the pre-tenure years can be critical for networking, recruitment and visibility. The informality and intimacy of smaller meetings usually affords the best opportunities for getting to know senior scientists in a field and for keeping up with major developments. There's no magic formula for becoming a prime schmoozer (nor is it even recommended), but people with experience can offer advice on making a good impression.

It's normal to feel overwhelmed and intimidated by the reputations of big names. Eleftherios Diamandis, a cancer researcher at the University of Toronto, Canada, "felt like a lost chicken" at his first American Association for Cancer Research meeting some 15 years ago. But he struck up a conversation with someone whose badge carried a name he thought sounded Greek, like his own. That casual meeting resulted in one the longest and most fruitful collaborations of Diamandis's career.

Junior faculty members should not wait until they have a complete science story to go to meetings, says Dirk Schübeler, an epigenetics researcher at the Friedrich Miescher Institute in Basel, Switzerland. "You are cutting yourself off if you wait," he says. Not only do you miss a couple years of networking, but more importantly, he notes, you miss the chance to see how your research fits into the field.

Exposing yourself

The people you meet at conferences will be competitors, future collaborators, old friends and colleagues in the same boat, as well as grant and manuscript reviewers and writers of tenure letters. A newly established investigator should mingle with all of them, in time, to become known as a contributor of appealing work in the field. Working the crowd doesn't come naturally to most scientists, but senior faculty members recommend finding the right amount of boldness. That means stepping outside your comfort zone of mixing with friends and known colleagues.

"My agenda will fill itself up with people I already know, so you will definitely have to make the first move," says Ted Weinert, a cell-cycle expert at the University of Arizona in Tucson, who likes to talk science over a one-to-one lunch or coffee. "When people ask for my opinion on their research, I'm always flattered," he adds.

Bernard Golding, a veteran organic chemist at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, suggests approaching a senior scientist after his or her presentation with a follow-up question. "Most of us are happy to sit down with whomever. The more questions I get at a lecture, the more I like it," he says.

Others say it can ease introductions if they are made by a mutual friend. Or invite established colleagues to stop by your poster to view data that would interest them, in time, to become known as a contributor of appealing work in the field. Working the crowd doesn't come naturally to most scientists, but senior faculty members recommend finding the right amount of boldness. That means stepping outside your comfort zone of mixing with friends and known colleagues.

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Morgan Tucker, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Colorado, Boulder, spent much of his time at the international *Caenorhabditis elegans* meeting in Los Angeles in June probing new faculty members about their job searches. He says it was eye-opening to hear how friends’ experiences at large and small universities compared.

As a postdoc, cell biologist Heike Fölsch sought out senior people at a Gordon Conference to discuss their science — critical for getting invited for job interviews. She started her own lab at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois in 2002. At July’s Gordon Conference on molecular membrane biology in Andover, New Hampshire, she became an advocate for her lab and its publications “to present myself as somebody with interesting theories” in the field. She finds that small conferences give her more opportunities to make an impression than her field’s annual large meeting, with thousands of participants.

Veterans agree that new faculty members should attend smaller series such as Gordon research conferences, Keystone symposia or summer meetings organized by the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology and those held at the University of Wales’ Gregynog centre. Anything with more than 200 participants, and you get lost in the crowd, Weinert says.

**FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

**“Schmoozing? I’m not so good at that. But you can’t get better advertising than giving a talk.”**

— Leonard Foster, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

“I have the same feeling every time. It’s too overwhelming, I’m intimidated, I get a little depressed, even. Then, in a couple of days, I’m in my element. It’s an emotional rollercoaster.” — Ted Weinert, University of Arizona, Tucson

**“I only go to small meetings in the woods or mountains where you are bumping into each other all the time.”**

— Dirk Schübeler, Friedrich Miescher Institute, Basel, Switzerland

“Go to smaller meetings in your field if you want to get tenured. The most influential people are not at the big meetings.” — Heike Fölsch, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois

**WEB LINKS**

Keystone Symposia
- www.keystonesymposia.org
- Gordon Research Conferences
- www.grc.uri.edu
- Gregynog Centre
- www.wales.ac.uk/gregynog
- FASEB summer research conferences
- src.faseb.org

Scientific meetings offer an informal way to forge new collaborations and build a reputation.

emphasize uniqueness — be it a new approach, technique or theory — and broad appeal to the field.

Besides being great publicity for a lab’s work, talks can help in recruiting. Even as a postdoc about to move, Schübeler began tackling a ‘help wanted’ job ad to the end of his talks. “Starting out, you are a blank page in terms of whether you are going to be able to run a lab,” he says. “Your talk shows that you are in control and can manage a lab.”

**Getting the buzz**

As a young investigator, Schübeler also hopes to get a scoop in his field. “You are still working out your projects, so it’s good to have a feel of what’s going on,” he says. “It influences how you will publish if everyone thinks something is important to address.” Fölsch notes that unpublished data get revealed at smaller, closed meetings, so these gatherings are best for keeping tabs on direct competitors.

Older scientists advise keeping low expectations and not to be too discouraged by feeling isolated at the first few meetings. Weinert suggests trying to meet only a couple of important contacts, and admits that he still feels intimidated at the start of a conference.

Now a field leader, Diamandis uses a large cancer meeting as an annual retreat for his entire lab group to celebrate a year of hard work. He notes that attending meetings consistently is the main way for researchers to move up among their peers, and to be invited to join committees and editorial boards.

Foster can see the wisdom in that. He may have made a rookie’s mistake at the sales booths, but there’s no mistaking the importance of attending meetings in his mind. “The biggest reason for meeting senior scientists,” he says, “is that those are the people who are going to be reviewing your grants and your papers. If they know you, you’ll have a better chance.”

Kendall Powell is a freelance science writer based in Broomfield, Colorado.