

CAREERS

NERDY NETWORKER Debut author explains why scientists are naturals p.731

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NETWORKING

Hello, stranger

Conferences are great for career development, but miscalculated moves can foil future prospects.

BY EMILY SOHN

At a karaoke party on the final night of a marine-sciences conference in 2011, graduate student David Shiffman signed up to sing a song that another attendee

had also requested. The event director asked the two to do a duet, and they agreed. Shiffman has since forgotten the tune — ‘Take on Me’ by A-ha or ‘I Will Survive’ by Gloria Gaynor, perhaps. But the two had a blast, and when they chatted afterwards, Shiffman learned that

his singing partner was Chris Parsons, then-president of the marine section of the Society for Conservation Biology in Washington DC.

In a 20-second elevator speech that he had fortuitously practised beforehand, Shiffman — who studies shark ecology at the University of Miami in Florida — told Parsons about a presentation that he had given about social media. Parsons was intrigued, and later invited Shiffman to be the first official live-tweeter at the December 2011 International Congress for Conservation Biology in Auckland, New Zealand. That was the first of many conferences that Shiffman has since live-tweeted and at which he has given talks, all of which have been fully funded by conferences and other organizations — successes thanks in part to that serendipitous karaoke duet.

COURTEOUS COURAGE

Shiffman’s experience is an example of how conferences can be a professional boon to early-career scientists, offering countless opportunities to meet mentors and collaborators as well as to impress potential employers. But there is also ample opportunity to trample those very chances. Bad behaviour, whether in or outside a session, can harm a junior researcher’s reputation and jeopardize his or her job prospects for years to come.

Although neophyte conference attendees may plan out the talks that they want to hear, rarely do they seek advice about the many unspoken rules of proper conference etiquette. Instead, learning often happens by trial and error. “You kind of muck your way through it,” says Jacquelyn Gill, a palaeoecologist at the University of Maine in Orono. “You figure out the cultural norm from watching other people.”

In lectures or talks, those norms include turning off mobile-phone ringers, asking appropriate questions and leaving rooms quietly when a speaker is presenting. Outside meeting rooms, early-career researchers should make an effort to network without monopolizing conversations, tweet in accordance with conference regulations and socialize prudently.

Ultimately, conference attendance is like being in an interactive stage performance, veteran conference-goers say — and every audience member is part of the act. People notice and remember what others do. “Conferences are wonderful opportunities for students and early-career researchers to learn skills, get feedback and find collaborators,” says Shiffman. But, he adds, “your behaviour at conferences ▶

▶ affects your reputation in your field".

Concerns about disturbing others when entering and exiting conference rooms can paralyse early-career researchers. But it is commonplace to jump from room to room when desirable talks are scheduled simultaneously. Smaller meetings boost attendees' visibility and the potential for disruption, so attendees who aim to leave a session early or to arrive late should try to grab an aisle seat near the back of the room and take care not to slam doors.

DIGITAL DISCIPLINE

Minimizing disruption also means managing digital devices, including muting laptops and abstaining from online surfing. "If I'm sitting behind you and I see that you're browsing TMZ, I might get distracted, too," says immunologist Gaia Vasiliver-Shamis, director of career development at the Emory University

School of Medicine in Atlanta, Georgia. Live-tweeting, on the other hand, is encouraged by many researchers, although debates swirl around proper posting protocol (see 'How not to tweet like a twit').

Digital devices do not just disrupt others: they can be physically dangerous. Once, while Schiffman was setting up to live-tweet a conference session, he strung power cords along the floor — causing a senior researcher to stumble in the middle of his own talk. "He was pacing, and he tripped over my wire," Schiffman says. "It was a brief, heart-stopping moment. Now, I'm careful to warn people when they walk by."

It is also important to avoid rhetorical trip-ups during the question-and-answer period after a talk. This is a chance for early-career researchers to make a good impression, but they should avoid asking lengthy questions or too many, as well as seeking details that the

speaker already addressed — say, while the questioner was checking Facebook. If the question is relevant only to the person asking, it is best to follow up later in a private chat.

Still, junior researchers should conquer their insecurities and speak up. "There's nothing that impresses people as much as someone prepared to ask questions at a meeting," says Georgia Chenevix-Trench, a cancer geneticist at the QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute in Herston, Australia. After years of experiencing frustration with students' behaviour at conferences and elsewhere, she helped to write a guide for PhD students and postdocs that has since been well circulated. "Even if they are not very good questions, it still has people impressed that you've got the courage," she points out. And there is a good chance that others in the audience have the same question.

Junior researchers should tread carefully when it comes to joking around. At the end of a hike during a biology meeting a few years ago, Vasiliver-Shamis walked past a professor clad in shorts who had also been on the hike and was scheduled to speak at the next session. Jokingly, she asked if he was going to wear the same clothes for his talk. That had, in fact, been his original plan. Vasiliver-Shamis thought he knew that she was not serious — but the professor went to his room and changed into trousers. At the beginning of his talk, he brought up the exchange and told the audience that he hoped they liked his outfit. Luckily, the professor had taken her ribbing well — but the outcome could have been different. "Be careful whom you joke with," she warns now.

KERRY HYNDMAN/GETTY

TENETS OF TWITTER

How not to tweet like a twit

Live-tweeting has become the norm at conferences, creating the need for new — as yet unwritten — etiquette rules on how to tweet appropriately in conference sessions.

At a meeting of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology in Berlin last November, for example, one researcher took to Twitter to complain about tweets that included unpublished results from her session. Although she garnered support, others disagreed. It was not an isolated incident.

The tension reached a frustrating climax at a meeting of the Ecological Society of America (ESA) in Baltimore, Maryland, in August. The ESA's official policy allowed live-tweeting. But the night before the conference started, the society's Twitter handle, @ESA_org, announced that live-tweeting was OK only if attendees asked first and presenters gave consent. Confused, many usually enthusiastic tweeters stayed quiet — leading some to complain that the conference hashtag was particularly dull.

Done right, proponents say, live-tweeting can generate excitement among people who cannot attend a conference — and some data back that up. One case study looked at a meeting of the International Congress for Conservation Biology in 2011. Of 176 people in 40 countries who used the designated conference hashtag to live-tweet events, fewer than 10% actually attended the meeting (D. S. Schiffman *J. Environ. Stud. Sci.* <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10914-012-9840-2>; 2012). Author David Schiffman, who studies shark ecology at the University of Miami in Florida, is himself a frequent live-tweeter, with 24,600 followers and a history of 137,000 tweets. He has repeatedly seen conscientious conference tweeting lead to



positive media coverage, travel opportunities and research collaborations.

On the flip side are concerns that tweets could reveal sensitive information or raw data, wresting control from scientists over when and how people hear about their work. Tweets should be positive, accurate and focused on cool facts, useful announcements or links to helpful resources. Using the conference hashtag and including the handle of any researchers mentioned are crucial.

Things not to tweet include locations of vulnerable archaeology sites, pictures of slides that contain sensitive information, rude comments about others or anything that someone asks to be kept off Twitter. If a conference has a no-tweeting policy, follow it. "There is a time and a place to be an activist," says Jacquelyn Gill, a palaeoecologist and Twitter enthusiast at the University of Maine in Orono. "Being in a position of vulnerability as an early-career researcher is not that time or place." E.S.

STARSTRUCK SHIVERS

Awkward jokes aside, junior researchers should not squander the opportunity to chat with senior scientists between sessions. Schiffman says that he has seen PhD students and postdocs eye renowned scientists at meetings and dream out loud about how great it would be to talk to them someday. "People attend conferences to meet other people, and this includes very senior researchers in your field," he says. "You should not be afraid to go up and introduce yourself, ask for their opinions about your research or ask if they're taking on students or collaborators. The worst they can say is 'no'."

An e-mail request to an eminent researcher before the conference can smooth the way for a brief meeting, says Chenevix-Trench, who advises the use of formal business-letter style rather than the more casual approach of, "Hi, how's your day going?". It is also important to accommodate the researcher's schedule — and to show up. Junior scientists should prepare a short elevator speech about their own research for the meet and follow up with a courteous e-mail thanking the colleague.

Although many junior researchers fix their sights on celebrities in their field, they need to recognize the importance of also socializing with people who are at their own career stage.

Lifelong friendships bloom frequently at happy hours and parties, and those relationships can generate research collaborations, job opportunities and more. At a biogeography meeting in Mexico a few years ago, Gill met another graduate student who became a friend, a regular roommate at subsequent conferences and later, a lab-mate. Similarly, Vasiliver-Shamis met her future postdoc supervisor at a meeting of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology when he started chatting with her at a poster presentation that she was giving. "Everyone you meet is like an interview," she says. "Just be aware. You don't know when you're going to meet this person next."

For Jonathan Tennant, a palaeontologist at Imperial College London, conferences have even provided a personal-life boost. He met his girlfriend at a social gathering at the 2014 Society of Vertebrate Paleontology meeting in Berlin. And he has stayed or toured with friends in foreign cities after getting to know them at conferences or befriending them first on Twitter and then connecting in person at a meeting. "I've got so many great friends all over the world now," he says. "It's useful to have seeds like that everywhere."

Although conference parties are natural places to make friends, there are social pitfalls to watch out for. Alcohol often flows freely at these events, Gill says, and she has seen students get too drunk to attend presentations and posters — including their own — the next day. It doesn't help career prospects to be the person who is known for indiscriminate behaviour of any sort, she points out.

"You're around all the people who are going to make decisions about your future — the people who are going to review your papers, who are going to decide if they want to give you a scholarship or a research grant or a postdoc," she says.

Despite all the 'dos' and 'don'ts' involved in conference etiquette, veterans say that major gaffes are actually quite rare. Most often, attendees who use good judgement go home with new knowledge, contacts and friends. That is true even for first-timers. "I was surprised how unbelievably warm and welcoming everyone was to me and other new people," Shiffman recalls of his first conference. Now in the fifth year of his PhD programme, he has been to 29 conferences with many more to come. "They have," he says, "made a big impact on my life." ■

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TURNING POINT

Alaina Levine



When science-careers consultant and author Alaina Levine gained her undergraduate mathematics degree, she was told that it would be useful only in academia or accountancy. Deciding those were not for her, she has been running a career-coaching business since 2004 and in June published her first book, Networking for Nerds (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

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maths background has helped me significantly in public speaking and comedy, because it gave me critical planning and analysis tools. For every joke I craft and make during a speech, I think about what the outcomes of that joke will be. I map out tactics two to three steps ahead.

How did you switch careers?

I had done public-engagement work for the physics department at the University of Arizona, which prepared me for a job as director of communications for the department, and I stayed for four years. After that, I became the director of special projects in the college of science at the university, where I developed its professional science master's programme.

What was your remit?

Part of my job was to get my students jobs. I had to talk to employers about their needs, go back to the students and teach them those things. I started teaching the soft skills that students were not getting as part of their scientific training, such as how to search and interview for a job, how to get a job, how to network.

Why did you decide to write a book?

As a careers consultant and when I give talks, I've interacted with scientists who think that networking is a negative action — it takes time away from being in the lab. Or they are uncomfortable going to meet people they do not know, and so won't bother. I wanted to stress that networking can help scientists, and that there are things they can do to calm themselves and boost their confidence. For example, they can start conversations on an aeroplane. The more they do this in scenarios where they do not feel pressure, the more confident they will be in settings such as professional conferences.

What have you learned about scientists' soft skills?

Scientists are naturally curious — and scientific training actually helps researchers to become better networkers because it is based on asking questions, which they do anyway. The most interesting thing is that scientists are networking, but they're just calling it something else, like 'discussing the opportunity to collaborate'. As they improve these skills, they understand how beneficial networking is and how much it is a part of the scientific method. The sooner they realize this, the sooner they can put it to effective use. ■

INTERVIEW BY JULIE GOULD

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.