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How to Win Friends and Influence Attendees at a Conference

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In August, the [National Conference of State Legislatures \(NCSL\) Annual Summit](#) in Louisville, Kentucky was the place to be. More than 5,000 state legislators, city and county councilmembers, staff, exhibitors, lobbyists, and advocates converged to talk about civility in partisan politics, AI in the public sector, distinguishing biases from fact, how to beat stupidity, and much more. The experience showcased how a short period of time with so many people discussing so many topics can cause a person to feel overwhelmed and get lost in the noise.



So, how do you break through to make your own impact when there's so much going on?

Dale Carnegie's [*How to Win Friends & Influence People*](#) is a staple in how to make an impact regardless of situation. Here are five tips I gleaned from attending the Summit and putting some of Carnegie's principles to practice: be interested in the other person, approach people in a friendly way, and make them talk about themselves. These approaches are time tested; they are simple tricks of the trade on how to make friends and build rapport from the start. However you adapt them, the goal is to ensure you make a lasting impact on those with whom you interact. Here are examples of the approaches in practice:

1. **Use food as a conduit.**

The adage of "everyone has to eat" doesn't ring truer than at a conference. The opening reception had thousands of people mingling, which was a bit daunting upon entering the [Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts](#), a local nonprofit. So, what is the most natural thing to do? Start with a drink (alcoholic or not) or head straight to the food tables. While it always seems less awkward with something in your hand, the line for the dishes often lends itself to easy conversation – whether about the available fare or how difficult it is to hold the plates, a napkin, and a drink all at once, which is what led me to chatting to two

legislators from my home state. The same occurred during lunch when my entire table of Australian and North Dakota legislators agreed that while Kentucky fried chicken was an appropriate dish, cutting it with plasticware was impossible. All these situations allowed for small talk that led to much more substantive discussions in a low-stakes atmosphere where conversation is expected.

2. Ask about the legislator's priority.

NCSL, which specifically serves state legislators, offers a rare opportunity to interact with thousands of lawmakers across the country. The elected officials are used to lobbyists coming up to them wanting something. I found the easiest way to avoid just being another taker was to simply ask them what their priorities were last session. This is particularly helpful when you have no idea who they are or what state they represent. When standing in a rather long line for an activity, the woman behind seemed friendly and open to chatting. Rather than jump into my normal pitch, I introduced myself and NCN and inquired what issues were affecting her community. Turns out, she was an upstate New York legislator and responded that suicide rates among teenagers were of particular concern for her. This led to a comparison of the needs of rural communities versus New York City. We discussed strategies for introducing legislation, the need for more funding for government and nonprofit partnerships, and how the needs for nonprofit service providers have increased. And of course, I offered to be a resource to connect her with other nonprofits in the state.

3. Inquire about what's going on.

NCSL does a fantastic job of making sure you know where you are when attending one of their events. The [Kentucky Derby Museum](#) hosted a table in the main lobby where every attendee could customize and take home their very own Kentucky Derby hat – for free. To say it was a hit would be an understatement with a line running the stretch of the convention center. But it was hard to tell what was going on from the outside. This allowed me to turn to another bystander debating about joining the line to ask what all the fuss was about. She explained what was going on, and in being impressed, I commented on the fact that it was a nonprofit providing the experience. That led to a natural conversation about nonprofits in her state as well, and we discovered that we had worked on the same piece of legislation last year. We were able to end with sharing tips on how to prepare for the bill when it comes back around next spring.

4. **Make exhibitor allies.**

Conferences are not equal when it comes to exhibitors and sponsors, and NCSL goes above and beyond with the number, size, and time available for exhibitors to be spotlighted. While the high volume of for-profit vendors and trade associations was obvious, I made a concerted effort to thank fellow nonprofits like the [American Heart Association](#) and [The Arc](#) for their work. The connections were obvious and easy. Similarly, government agency tables for the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics provided an amazing opportunity to make direct connections with potential partners. They seemed genuinely happy to speak with someone so interested in how they ensure a fair and accurate census or determine what constitutes an occupation versus an industry. I would go so far as to argue that they were more important than most of the vendors, but it's hard to stand out with more than 250 exhibitors including Amazon, Meta, Google, and puppies at the American Humane Society (but we support that as a nonprofit).

5. **Use your legislative champions.**

Legislators like to talk to other legislators and sometimes you need one of them to start the conversation. We at the National Council of Nonprofits were honored to host the [National Nonprofit Caucus of State Legislators](#) reception with Maryland Senator Cheryl C. Kagan. As the Chair of the Caucus, she was able to settle the room and bring clout to the event. Danielle Clore, CEO of the [Kentucky Nonprofit Network](#) (KNN), and I then introduced the National Nonprofit Caucus and two of the co-chairs of the Kentucky Nonprofit Caucus, Reps. Heavrin and Stevenson, and Pennsylvania Nonprofit Caucus leader Rep. Salisbury. The lawmakers talked about their initiatives while explaining the value of working alongside KNN and the [Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations](#) (PANO). These partnerships gave credence to our organizations and the work that we do together while starting the needed advocacy pushes with the lawmakers directly. When you have someone like a legislator vouch for you, it's easier to be taken seriously from the jump.

Thousands of people in a convention hall can overwhelm and intimidate even the most seasoned of advocates. The trick is to treat each interaction as an opportunity for short, meaningful impact. Making the other person feel seen and heard allows you both to walk away with a deeper connection. In short, do as Carnegie suggests: become genuinely interested in the other person, smile, listen, and talk in terms of the other person's interests. And I'll add, do it because your mission is that important.