



# Professional Networking at Gastroenterology Scientific Meetings: A Trainee's Practical Guide

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## Introduction

As social organisms, humans value personal and collegial interactions above almost every other form of communication. As a person starting their career, GI fellows can derive immense benefit from developing relationships with their mentors, peers, and leaders that can last throughout their professional careers. One of the most efficient and powerful ways of developing contacts is through networking at medical conferences, venues that present unique opportunities to learn and disseminate novel findings while interacting with colleagues around the globe. Effective networking can lead to collaboration, exchange of ideas, external and peer-mentorship, and job opportunities. Though networking during conferences can be challenging for trainees for several reasons, including lack of guidance on how to network effectively, inexperience, or having an introverted personality, networking skills can be developed over time and may be used for professional advancement.

The effects of networking on career success are well documented: A three year longitudinal survey study of a wide range of employees in Germany noted that networking behaviors can contribute to differential salary growth over time and to more career satisfaction [1]. Similarly, a study by Benedict et al. assessed the perspectives of medical students regarding the use of a networking-based assignment called “Personalized Resource List,” which encouraged students to systematically build a network that would support their future careers [2]. Students who participated found that a formalized assignment within their curriculum was beneficial to their professional development.

The authors participated in a live discussion in podcast format (Twitter spaces) one week prior to Digestive Diseases Week (DDW) 2022 that substantially engaged residents and fellows nationally (256 participants joined the live podcast; the recording was streamed 1092 times during the following 30 days while available on Twitter) [3]. The amount of interest generated thus exposed a need and desire for more guidance on networking, hence the motivation to write this perspective. A summary of the authors’ discussion is provided in this piece, with the goal to share diverse perspectives from current gastroenterology (GI) and hepatology fellows on developing and augmenting networking skills.

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## Principals of Professional Networking

### General Premise

The importance of communication skills is often emphasized early during medical training. Though skills such as taking a medical history or engaging in difficult patient conversations are often practiced, other skills, such as effective networking, are often overlooked, notwithstanding that teaching networking skills is at the forefront of many other fields, such as business and consulting [4].

During early career stages, attending medical conferences can often feel overwhelming. To address this sentiment, it is essential to establish unique personal and professional goals prior to the conference allowing for plenty of planning time to target specific activities based on those goals. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has changed the landscape of meetings from in-person to hybrid formats and with that change, there has been a profound impact on how individuals are able to connect with one another. Despite the discomfort that can be associated with face-to-face networking, forming meaningful connections can be helpful as it can lead to establishing mentors, finding collaborations, gaining knowledge about novel programs at other institutions, and learning of opportunities for future positions and involvement in national organizations (Fig. 1).

### Establishing Goals

Networking goals can be highly personalized: They can include attending lectures and special sessions, exploring the poster and exhibit halls for research collaboration and inspiration, or arranging one-on-one meetings for employment and mentorship opportunities. Trainees should recall that networking with peers is as important as networking with leaders in the field. For instance, a chief fellow should engage with other chief fellows to share ideas about educational conferences and curriculum development. If a conference has a desktop or a telephone-based application, explore these resources prior to the meeting. Consider building a calendar for sessions to attend, while remembering that day-to-day flexibility is necessary based on opportunities that may arise during the conference. If you

need connections, look into education committees, career workshops, or social gathering sessions where networking is encouraged. Remember, most scientific content can be accessed later on-demand. Prepare an updated resume/curriculum vitae (CV) prior to attending a meeting. While it is not necessary to carry a paper copy of one's CV at the conference, it may be useful following a conversation with a potential colleague for future collaboration or job opportunities.

When considering what types of encounters are feasible at a national or local conference, individuals may have limited time outside of meetings and sessions within their scope to personally meet with you. When interested in meeting with a specific individual, it may be wise to contact them several weeks ahead of the conference to find a mutually suitable time to meet. When reaching out, state the intention of the meeting and be respectful of the individual's time and commitments. Mentors and colleagues at one's own institution may help bridge these connections. Dr. Nikki Duong, a fast-track hepatology fellow at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), recounted networking with key faculty at VCU at the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases (AASLD) meeting in 2019. As an Emerging Liver Scholar (ELS), he utilized this network in order to bridge these connections. A month later, he had matched at VCU after not matching a year prior. He states that "one will never know what role these impromptu interactions play, but now these individuals are my clinical, research, and life mentors. Networking encounters, as informal or brief (and at times unexpected) as they can be at national meetings, are clearly invaluable and the impression you make certainly lasts forever."



Fig. 1 Tips for networking at a professional medical conference

Ask yourself which environment for networking suits you better. If you like to be in a large crowd, you might head to large podium sessions with a presenter of interest. If smaller intimate gatherings suit you best, you might consider exploring the poster halls and smaller breakout sessions. If you are attending a conference virtually, explore built-in opportunities to request one-on-one meetings and collect contact information for meeting colleagues later. Dr. Daniela Guerrero Vinsard, a third-year GI fellow at Mayo Clinic, shares that her work was declined for presentation when submitted for the first time to a GI conference. She decided to continue attending the meeting, including a luncheon themed on primary care in inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). A year later, she gave an oral presentation on IBD vaccination inspired by that luncheon and was able to connect with the luncheon's speaker and publish a paper with them. She resubmitted her previously declined research work to United European Gastroenterology Week (UEGW) where she was able to present in person. While presenting at UEGW, she met some of her current Japanese mentors and subsequently, she was able to visit Japan for a clinical rotation with them. The combination of academic resilience and networking at GI meetings shaped her trajectory into GI fellowship.

### Preparing an “Elevator Pitch”

Since experts and leaders in the field are often inundated with responsibilities during national meetings and might have limited time, it is advisable that while reaching out to them, having a brief introduction or “elevator pitch” ready might allow for meaningful use of the trainee’s interaction. It is recommended that you develop and rehearse an elevator pitch that is concise and high yield. Often elevator pitches are recommended to be 30–60 seconds. The purpose of an elevator pitch is to engage and educate an individual or audience in a short time. An elevator pitch can be used to pursue professional opportunities or develop new connections. Elevator pitches should include details on who you are, unique strengths, career goals, and planned impact. While elevator speeches are curated, they should feel authentic (Fig. 2). Elevator pitches should not be a memorized monologue, but instead should allow for flexibility based on your audience. Consider practicing your elevator pitch with colleagues and mentors to get feedback for improvement. Dr. Joseph Sleiman, a GI fellow at University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, recounts being introduced to Dr. Aline Charabaty, the clinical director of the IBD center at Sibley Memorial Hospital, 10 min before she received the Healio Social Media Influencer award at the American College of Gastroenterology (ACG) 2019 conference. He had pitched his interest in IBD by joining her efforts at education through social media platforms, and has become one of her formal ambassadors

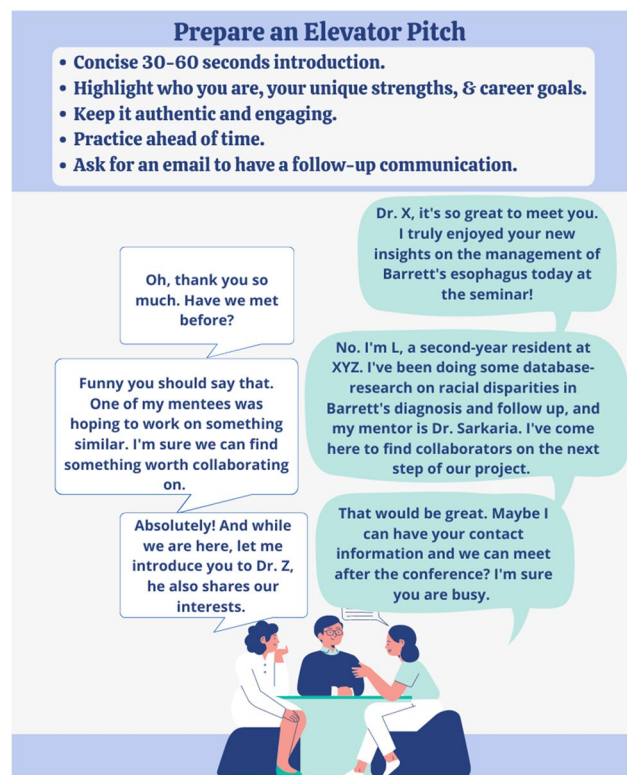


Fig. 2 Elevator pitch at a professional medical conference

on Twitter’s #MondayNightIBD weekly discussions, and is working on other collaborations as well.

Following a conversation, consider obtaining or providing contact information to encourage communication following the encounter. Furthermore, follow up the in-person interaction with an email to appreciate the time and continue to build the relationship.

### Initiating Contact

When approaching someone for the first time, it is important to demonstrate a true interest in a shared topic, as well as genuine admiration for the colleague’s work. One way to demonstrate enthusiasm for someone else’s work is by being familiar with their research, reading their biography or by showing that you paid attention to their talk. Think about adding “intentional value” to your conversation by discussing specifics rather than making generic statements such as “I enjoyed your talk”. An example would be to show how a specific point that the colleague brought up might influence your career or research interests, justifying why you think the colleague might be a good fit as a mentor or collaborator. While exploring new opportunities for networking, keep an open mind and welcome all or any communication that you may have, even from individuals with whom you did not initially set out to connect. A conversation today could

yield fruitful opportunities in the future. For instance, if you are interested in medical education, the individual might reach out to you in a year about an opportunity that might be of interest to you, while they did not have any opportunity for you at that time. Dr. Mohammad Bilal, an Assistant Professor of Medicine at the University of Minnesota and an advanced endoscopist at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center, recounts that an initial contact was established during the ACG 2019 annual meeting in an effort to collaborate on an endoscopic research project. While the research project was never pursued, the connection ultimately led to a job opportunity after 6 months. “While in the moment it may seem that the connection is not useful, one can never predict how the connection will build, help and develop in the future,” he said.

### Engaging at the Poster Sessions

Poster sessions are engineered in theme-based corridors, which facilitates networking with colleagues who share your interests. Presenters from other institutes have worked with mentors in whom you may be interested in connecting; furthermore, interactions among poster presenters often help break the pauses in between poster visitors. In addition to interacting with your direct neighbors, we recommend you visit other poster areas that appeal to you to broaden networking possibilities. Dr. Elizabeth Aby, a transplant hepatology fellow at University of Minnesota, commented that joining the AASLD ELS program in 2016 was beneficial for many reasons, including the development of peer mentorship relationships with trainees across the country. She says, “Don’t underestimate the importance of networking and collaborating with your peers and near-peers as a trainee as those individuals will be your colleagues in the future.”

Standing by your poster is an opportunity to engage with conference attendees at different stages of their career and diverse backgrounds. For this reason, it is advised that you prepare a succinct presentation of your work that can be tailored to physicians and to non-physician professionals, the latter being another potential for future collaboration. If you have two or more posters at the same time, ask a team member to present the work on your behalf. If you don’t have any team members who are able to present your work on your behalf, consider leaving a note on posters where you will not be present to indicate how attendees can reach to you with any questions or if they are interested in collaborating with you. QR codes that link back to your CV/abstract are other tools to highlight your work when you cannot be present for the entire session. If you have a professional social media account that is reflective of your interests and/or passions, you may wish to include your tag or handle at the bottom of your poster.

Finally, the authors believe that a well formatted and attractively arranged poster can increase engagement with your work. Both classical and “poster 2.0” formats have their respective appeals [5]. Poster 2.0 was created by Mike Morrison (Twitter: @mikemorrison), PhD in an effort to highlight the principal finding(s) of the science being presented, and significantly reduce the time conference attendees require to parse the information on a poster, thus maximizing the dissemination of potentially useful knowledge through the scientific community. The re-invented poster layout spotlights a large, central, simple takeaway message and moves the remaining, more classical, parts of a poster to the side bars. In particular, this format intentionally encourages audience participation with the poster presenter, which thereby renders the poster a networking tool in itself.

### Using Social Media

The use of social media (SoMe) has become more widespread at medical conferences, whereby attendees report events and talks throughout the day. Most medical conferences now have official “hashtags” whereby other attendees can engage, interact and showcase their work. Although SoMe engagement can be useful, it can feel overwhelming to some.

For those who choose to participate in SoMe, consider the following advice: First, be aware that since your SoMe presence is visible to medical and non-medical audiences, be mindful about what you choose to share, always following the principles of The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) and following your institutional SoMe policies [6]. Second, always share evidence-based content in order to build a credibility among your followers. Third, sharing your work is important since it allows for a broader dissemination and reach, and opens doors to further collaborations. We recommend you do so in a humble and respectful manner, recognizing the contributions of your colleagues and collaborators, celebrating your research as a symbol of teamwork and advancement in patient care. Finally, we recommend you equally highlight the work of others, to genuinely show your sense of mutualism and eagerness to learn from all achievements. Highlighting the achievement of colleagues creates a positive atmosphere that reflects the conference’s goal of celebrating the successes of collaboration. Dr. Rashmi Advani, an advanced endoscopy fellow at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, has emerged as a known physician educator to both peers and patients by using multiple social media outlets in the last two years. “These years have been extremely fruitful in creating relationships outside of my home institution”, she noted. “Earlier in the pandemic, when I started connecting with others virtually who also demonstrated a passion for connection through virtual education, I was presented

with several opportunities (podcasts, Zoom discussions, collaborative research, and guest speaker/moderator for talks) to lead or be a part of several committees for various GI societies. During the in-person conferences this past year, I specifically attended lectures/meetings with those I've connected with online which has given me the opportunity to build stronger relationships with them."

## Social Networking

Attending a conference inherently provides colleagues a chance to meet in a more relaxed setting, occasionally after the conference sessions are finished for the day. Post-conference informal dinners, receptions, and other gatherings provide opportunities to network outside of the conference while building friendships. As gastroenterologists, we will spend the rest of our careers attending these meetings where professional relationships can often turn into meaningful lifelong friendships. While attendees are encouraged to connect with others outside the conference, one must remember to maintain a certain level of professionalism. Additionally, it is advisable to be judicious with your social events so as not to impair your participation on the following conference day.

Professional attire at scientific meetings is encouraged to project an air of confidence and to fit in with one's colleagues. Given that a typical conference day might entail walking for 4–5 miles, comfortable yet attractive footwear is essential. In general, your clothing, appearance, and demeanor should project professionalism, respect for norms, and some personal flair. Well-placed society pins and other accessories can signal others about your accomplishments and interests.

## Conclusion

Medical societies offer professional conferences throughout the year where colleagues from around the world can come together and share the latest innovations and developments in the field, learn, engage and network with likeminded

colleagues. With effective networking, these conferences can be parlayed into prime opportunities for establishing collaborations, finding mentorship, inspiration for novel research, and developing lifelong relationships.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** Joseph Sleiman, Nikki Duong, Elizabeth S. Aby, Daniela Guerrero Vinsard, Rashmi Advani and Mohammad Bilal have no conflict of interest related to this manuscript.

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