

Main Street Story of the Week, January 14, 2014

## **Ten networking tips for the National Main Street Conference**

The National Main Street Conference will be held in Detroit MI this year and there is plenty to learn from the towns that will be welcoming us from Michigan Main Street, Main Street Oakland County, and the hundreds of others that will join us in the Motor City. The thousand or more Main Street volunteers, vendors, executive directors/managers, consultants, speakers, state program coordinators and the National Main Street Center Board and staff will all be in Detroit to network, schmooze, and to swap stories.

Whether you are a new manager or an “old timer,” the conference is a great opportunity to learn from your peers and just remind yourself that “you are not alone” in your local downtown revitalization efforts. Everyone that attends the conference, year in and year out, says that it is an uplifting and inspiring experience because of the stories told during conference sessions, in the hallways, at Big Bash, the Opening Reception, or with peers at a neighboring watering hole. The best thing about the conference is that you are surrounded by people who do exactly what you do--perhaps in another state or region of the country--but everyone shares similar frustrations, joys and determination to make their downtown better.

We’ve compiled some tips to make the most of networking during the conference. We focus on making contacts and getting to know new people who might provide insights and ideas that you can use when you return home.

### **1. Identify who you want to chat with in advance**

Sign up and “like” the Main Street Conference in Detroit at <https://www.facebook.com/NationalMainStreetsConference> . You will get all the important information in your newsfeed. Scan the posts regularly to find anything of interest before you arrive. Perhaps someone mentions an issue or idea that is similar to one your are struggling with right now. Find their contact info and ask to set a brief time to connect at the conference. For registered attendees, there will be a list others attending QUESTION FOR VANESSA – WHEN WILL THIS BE AVAILABLE AND HOW WILL PEOPLE ACCESS THIS? Go through the attendee list and circle people you specifically want to meet when you arrive. List these people on a card or on a reminder page of your smart phone, so you don’t forget who you want to deliberately “run into.”

### **2. Bring lots of business cards**

You will need to bring a large stack of business cards to the conference. It is common practice to write notes to yourself on cards you receive so that you remember what you talked about, as

this information might be handy in the future. Consider bringing a good handful of your best promotional pieces to show and share with others.

### **3. Networking strategy for the Opening Reception**

Use the opening reception to reconnect with old friends, but make sure you meet at least a handful of new people, and exchange business cards. The opening reception is a good time to seek out specific people you want to meet, as it is the one of the few times during the conference that everyone is in one place.

### **4. Come early to the Opening Plenary Session**

Another time when everyone is together is at the Opening Plenary Session, where you generally sit with your state delegation. It is a good idea to come early and scout out the people you want to meet, or make arrangements to meet and sit together during this inspiring session. Cheer on the Great American Main Street Award winners, and make plans for lunch with a new friend.

### **5. Reconnect with your colleagues at your State Dinner**

Attend your State Dinner to reconnect with other Executive Directors in your state. Make sure you meet any new manager/Executive Director and offer to introduce them to other managers you know. Hanging out with your state coordinating program staff for much of the conference can be fun, but make sure you meet new people too.

### **6. Introduce yourself and chat up the Main Street Center staff**

Make sure you introduce yourself to all the staff members of the National Main Street Center, including Patrice Frey, Carolyn Dellutri, Kathy LaPlante, Norma Miese, Steve Amraen, Rachael Bowdon, Hannah White and Deb Wise. Some of these folks are new to Main Street, so they need to hear from the rank and file about your downtown triumphs and tragedies. Make sure to give them your card and tell them about your hopes for the new Center. Ask for advice about issues you are having or just brag about the great work you are doing. Don't forget, bragging is an important part of networking too! See photos and brief bios of all the staff members here [http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/about-main-street/the-center/staff.html#.UsbxC\\_RDua8](http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/about-main-street/the-center/staff.html#.UsbxC_RDua8)

## **7. Talk to the New Board members of the Main Street Center**

Likewise make sure you chat up Board member of the new Main Street Center, as they will be very interested in hearing from managers and volunteers too. NMSC Board members include: Barbara G. Sidway, Chair of the Board; David J. Brown, Vice President of the NTHP; Samuel B. Dixon; Joe Grills; Irvin M. Henderson; Beppie LeGrand, State Coordinator for South Carolina and Mary Thompson. Learn more about each one of the new NMSC board members here [http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/about-main-street/the-center/nmsc-board-of-directors.html#.Usbwu\\_RDua8](http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/about-main-street/the-center/nmsc-board-of-directors.html#.Usbwu_RDua8)

## **8. Connect with speakers and panel members**

Introduce yourself to speakers and panel members whose presentations you find particularly interesting or relevant. Get their cards, share yours, describe issues relevant to their talk. If you think someone has a particular perspective that would be helpful for you, ask if you can set a time to call them or follow up by email. Most speakers, you will find, are generous with their time, and want to hear about issues and concerns. They can steer you to other resource materials or people if they can't help. The Crash Courses are meant to be short and informal learning opportunities, so definitely chat with speakers and other attendees at those sessions, especially people who ask questions that resonate with you and your town's situation.

## **9. Chat up seat mates on tours**

Tours are a great opportunity to meet new people and share ideas. If you are on a bus, chat up your seat mate, as you might have a half an hour or more together on the bus to swap stories. Some tours may last a full day or a half day, where you will go and meet people who are showing off their great downtown projects. Speak up and ask questions of the volunteers showing you around, and swap cards.

## **10. Meet new people at Big Bash**

Go to Big Bash to meet new people. While most Bash-goers will be intent on having a fun time with old friends, this is a great opportunity to meet new people, especially as you wait on line for beer or food. Be bold, sit with people you don't know and ask about their programs and backgrounds.

Finally, have fun. The best part of the Main Street conference is finding new people who share the same passions as you and hearing about their successes and challenges. Come back refreshed and ready with a host of new ideas for your town.

Donna Ann Harris CMSM is the principal of Heritage Consulting Inc., a consulting firm based in Philadelphia that practices in downtown and commercial district revitalization, historic preservation, heritage tourism and nonprofit organizational development. She has spoken at the last eight Main Street conferences and will be conducting two sessions “Why Aren’t You Asking for Year End Gifts” and a Crash Course “Better Recruitment: Better Boards” both on Tuesday at the Main Street Conference in Detroit. Contact her at [donna@heritageconsultinginc.com](mailto:donna@heritageconsultinginc.com).