CONTENTS

The Space Professional's Conference Field Guide

The Space Professional's Conference Field Guide

A companion for professionals entering the space sector — what conferences are, why they exist, who moves through them, and how to turn a crowded hall into the single highest-leverage instrument in your career.

Owner: Patrick Connolly | **Version:** 1.0 | **Date:** June 25, 2026

How to Use This Field Guide

This is not a brochure and it is not a delegate handbook. It is a field guide — the kind of document you open three months before IAC when you are deciding whether the trip is worth €6,000, and again on the train home when you have forty business cards and no idea which three matter.

Most people treat conferences as events. They are not events. They are the periodic, physical instantiation of an industry that is otherwise scattered across continents and behind NDAs. For two or three days a year, the entire value chain of a sector — agencies, primes, startups, investors, regulators, academics, journalists, customers — stands in one building. What happens in that building is not socialising. It is the market clearing: deals initiated, reputations adjusted, intelligence exchanged, careers redirected. This guide teaches you to read that market and to act inside it deliberately.

It is built on research from organisational behaviour, network science, sales and marketing science, competitive intelligence practice, and the negotiation literature — distilled into principles you can act on rather than theories you have to admire. Throughout, each chapter closes with a *formation principle*: the durable human truth beneath the tactic, the part that does not change when the conference dates and the technology do.

This guide has a companion tool. The *Conference Playbook* (a free web page published alongside this guide at pconpiee.github.io, made to keep open on your phone) is the operational layer, deliberately lean — built to be useful the moment you open it and to make the one act that matters effortless. It follows the event in order: **Mindset**, **Prep** (a 30-second go/no-go gut-check, your scripts and the handful of people you're actually there to meet), **Floor** (the question bank and a five-field capture log you fill in the moment), and **Follow-Up** — the hero of the tool, where the trip pays for itself or doesn't — plus a one-page cheat sheet. This guide is the *theory and judgement* layer — the understanding you need before the tool can help you. Read the guide to learn how conferences work; use the Playbook to run a specific event. Where a chapter has a direct operational counterpart in the Playbook, it is flagged: → **Playbook.**

Three ways to use this guide:

1. Read it straight through before your first major conference, or before you take on responsibility for your organisation's conference programme.
2. Return to a specific chapter at a specific moment — the go/no-go decision (Ch. 5), the run-up (Ch. 6), the floor (Ch. 7), the follow-up (Ch. 8).
3. Use the Five-Year Conference Architecture (Ch. 12) as an annual discipline so that your presence in this sector compounds rather than resets every year.

A note on the facts. Conference dates, prices, attendance figures, and even names change every year. Where this guide names specific events, treat the *category and role* as durable and the *specifics as perishable* — always verify the current edition's facts before you commit budget. A convention worth adopting everywhere: ★ for facts verified against current data, ◆ for patterns inferred from historical editions.

CHAPTER ONE — Why Conferences Exist

The question nobody asks before booking the flight

Before you decide *which* conference, or *how* to work it, you have to understand *why the institution exists at all*. Almost everyone skips this, and it is why almost everyone wastes the trip. A conference is not a neutral container for talks. It is an economic and social mechanism with inputs, outputs, and a function in the ecosystem — and once you can see the mechanism, you can use it.

The conference as a market-clearing event

Economic geographers have a name for what happens when an industry that is normally dispersed periodically co-locates: a **temporary cluster** (Maskell, Bathelt & Malmberg, 2006, *European Planning Studies*). Their research on trade fairs found that these events function as concentrated bursts of what they call "global buzz" — a short, intense window in which information, observation, and relationship-building that would otherwise take a year of travel happens in seventy-two hours. The conference is the moment the dispersed industry becomes briefly legible to itself.

This reframes everything. You are not attending a programme of sessions. You are attending a market that opens for two days and then closes. The sessions are the *advertised* product. The market — the corridors, the coffee queues, the booths, the dinners — is the *actual* product.

Inputs, outputs, and flows

Think of any conference as a system with a metabolism:

INPUTS (WHAT THE ECOSYSTEM PUTS IN)	OUTPUTS (WHAT IT EXTRACTS)
Capital (sponsorship, ticket revenue, exhibitor fees, travel budgets)	Deals initiated and advanced (contracts, MOUs, term sheets)
Attention and time (thousands of senior person-hours)	Intelligence (who is building what, who is hiring, who is in trouble)
Information (talks, papers, product launches, roadmaps)	Reputation adjustments (who rose, who slipped, who is "back")
Relationships (existing ties brought into the room)	New relationships and reactivated dormant ties
Signals (announcements timed to the event)	Talent flows (hires, recruitment, career moves)
Physical presence (the scarce, expensive thing)	Consensus and narrative (what the sector now believes about itself)

The single most useful habit you can build is to ask, before every conference: *what am I putting in, and what specific outputs am I here to extract?* The attendee who cannot answer the second half of that question in concrete terms is donating inputs to other people's outputs.

Why the physical still matters in a video-call world

It would be reasonable to assume that video conferencing killed the need to fly. It did the opposite — it made physical presence *more* valuable by making it scarce and therefore costly-to-fake. This is **signalling theory** (Spence, 1973, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*): a signal is credible precisely because it is expensive. Flying a senior executive to Colorado Springs for three days is a costly signal of commitment that a Zoom call cannot replicate. When everything routine moved online, the physical event became the place reserved for things that *require* the expensive signal: trust-building, high-stakes negotiation, the read of someone's face across a table.

There is also the research on **trust and tacit knowledge**. Some kinds of information — whether you trust someone, whether a team has its act together, whether an organisation is healthy or quietly panicking — cannot be transmitted through documents. They are read in person, in the unguarded moment between sessions. Conferences exist because the most valuable information in any industry is precisely the information that does not survive being written down.

The four jobs a conference does for the ecosystem

1. **Price discovery for reputation.** The sector continuously, informally re-ranks its players. A conference is where those rankings update fastest — who got the keynote, whose booth is empty, whose party everyone wanted to attend.

2. **Reduction of search costs.** Instead of finding 200 relevant counterparties across the year, you find them in one building. The conference collapses a year of search into a weekend.
3. **Manufacture of serendipity.** The corridor collision, the seat-mate, the mutual friend's introduction — these are statistically engineered by co-location. The conference is a serendipity machine, and the people who win at conferences are the ones who maximise their surface area for useful accidents.
4. **Synchronisation of narrative.** After a major conference, the sector tends to agree on what the year's story is — the hot subsector, the dead one, the company everyone's watching. Being in the room means you help write that narrative instead of reading it later.

The formation principle

The most effective developers of people have always understood the difference between the crowd and the work. The crowd gathers in the thousands — on the main stage, in the plenary hall, around the headline announcement. But the real formation, the deals, the genuine transfer of trust and authority, happens in the smaller moments: a conversation in a corridor, a meal, a question asked while walking between sessions. Never confuse the size of the gathering with the depth of the work done inside it.

This is the first and most important reframe of the entire guide. The conference *crowd* is the advertised event. The *work* happens in the small rooms, the side conversations, the meals. Most people spend the conference in the crowd and wonder why nothing happened. Go for the small rooms. The crowd is how you find them.

Application: The metabolism map

Before your next conference, write a single page:

1. **Why does this specific event exist?** (Who founded it, who profits from it, what function it serves the ecosystem.)
2. **What are the three inputs I am putting in?** (Cost, time, information I'll share.)
3. **What are the three specific outputs I must extract to justify those inputs?** (Be concrete: "two grant conversations," not "good networking.")
4. **Where in this event does the *real work* happen** — and how do I get into those small rooms?

CHAPTER TWO — The Conference Landscape

A map of the territory before you spend a euro

There are hundreds of space events a year and you cannot attend a fraction of them. The skill is not attendance; it is *selection*. To select well you need a taxonomy — a way to classify any event by what it is *for*, because what an event is for determines who attends, what value it offers, and whether you belong there at all.

The seven archetypes

Almost every space conference is a blend of these seven types. Learn to identify the dominant type, because it tells you everything about how to behave there.

ARCHETYPE	CORE PURPOSE	WHO DOMINATES	WHAT YOU EXTRACT
The Flagship Congress	The whole sector convenes; prestige, papers, plenaries	Everyone — agencies, academia, industry, students	Breadth, visibility, serendipity, papers
The Deal Floor / B2B	Matchmaking and commerce; structured meetings	BD, sales, procurement, partnerships	Pipeline, contracts, supplier relationships
The Executive Summit	Senior strategy and finance; small, expensive	C-suite, investors, agency heads	High-level intelligence, capital, peer access
The Technical Conference	Peer-reviewed engineering and science	Engineers, scientists, R&D, PhDs	State-of-the-art, collaborators, recruitment
The Trade Expo	Supply chain, hardware, components	Manufacturers, buyers, suppliers	Vendor discovery, product demos, sourcing
The Policy / Diplomatic Forum	Multilateral dialogue, regulation, norms	Governments, agencies, lawyers, NGOs	Regulatory intelligence, convening, influence
The Defence / Dual-Use Event	National security space, often restricted	Military, defence primes, cleared contractors	Programme intelligence, dual-use partnerships

A single event can be two or three of these at once — IAC is Flagship + Technical + a growing Deal Floor; Paris Space Week is Deal Floor + Trade Expo; World Satellite Business Week is pure Executive Summit. Your job is to know the *dominant* type, because that's the game actually being played in the hallways.

The major events, by archetype

Categories and roles are durable; dates, prices and headcounts change every year — verify the current edition.

EVENT	ARCHETYPE(S)	REGION / CADENCE	WHO ATTENDS	WHY PEOPLE GO	ROUGH COST TIER
International Astronautical Congress (IAC)	Flagship + Technical	Rotating global, annual (autumn)	The entire sector — agencies, industry, academia, thousands of students	The one everyone attends; papers, plenaries, global serendipity	€€€ (travel-heavy)
Space Symposium (Space Foundation)	Flagship + Executive	Colorado Springs, annual (spring)	Very senior US civil/defence/commercial leadership	US power centre; the room where decision-makers actually are	€€€€
World Satellite Business Week (Novaspace/Euroconsult)	Executive Summit	Paris, annual (autumn)	C-suite, satcom operators, investors, bankers	Highest decision-maker density in commercial space; capital	€€€€€
SATELLITE	Deal Floor + Trade Expo	Washington DC, annual (spring)	Satcom commercial, operators, vendors	US commercial satcom marketplace	€€€
Paris Space Week	Deal Floor + Trade Expo	Paris, annual (spring)	European agencies, SMEs, startups, VCs, suppliers	Structured B2B matchmaking; thousands of pre-booked meetings	€€
Space Tech Expo Europe	Trade Expo + Technical	Bremen, annual (autumn)	Manufacturers, supply chain, engineers	Hardware, components, supplier discovery	€€
Space Tech Expo USA	Trade Expo	Long Beach, annual	US manufacturing supply chain	Sourcing, components, demos	€€
Small Satellite Conference (SmallSat)	Technical	Logan, Utah, annual (summer)	Smallsat engineers, academics, NewSpace	The smallsat technical canon; recruitment	€€
SmallSat Symposium	Deal Floor + Executive	Silicon Valley, annual (winter)	NewSpace business, investors	Commercial smallsat strategy and capital	€€€
NewSpace Europe	Deal Floor + Policy	Luxembourg, periodic	European NewSpace, resources, finance	NewSpace business development in Europe	€€
World Space Forum (UNOOSA)	Policy / Diplomatic	Vienna, annual	Governments, agencies, UN bodies	Multilateral space policy and capacity-building	€
GLEX (Global Space Exploration Conference)	Technical + Policy	Rotating, periodic	Exploration agencies and industry	Human/robotic exploration programmes	€€€
AMOS	Defence / Dual-Use + Technical	Maui, annual (autumn)	Space domain awareness, defence, optics	SSA/SDA technical and	€€€

EVENT	ARCHETYPE(S)	REGION / CADENCE	WHO ATTENDS	WHY PEOPLE GO	ROUGH COST TIER
				dual-use community	
AIAA conferences (ASCEND, SciTech, AVIATION)	Technical + Flagship	US, annual	Aerospace engineers, academia, industry	Deep technical, broad aerospace	€€€
Space-Comm Expo	Trade Expo + Deal Floor	UK, annual	UK/European industry, supply chain	UK ecosystem and supply chain	€
Regional / national days (ESA events, national space agency days, university symposia)	Varies	Local	Local ecosystem	Low-cost access, local relationships	€

How to read the cost tier. The number on the ticket is the smallest part. True cost = ticket + travel + accommodation (which spikes near big events) + the most expensive item of all, *senior person-days*. Put an explicit day rate on staff time and count it; a serious planner always does. A "free" local event that consumes two days of your week is not free.

Reading an event you've never heard of

When a new event lands in your inbox, triangulate fast:

1. **Who organises it, and how do they make money?** A commercial organiser (Novaspace, Clarion, Smarter Shows) runs a business; a society (IAF, AIAA) or a UN body (UNOOSA) runs a mission. This tells you whether you're the customer or the product.
2. **Who is on last year's speaker and sponsor list?** This is the truest signal of altitude. Logos don't lie about who shows up.
3. **What is the ratio of sessions to floor/meeting time?** Heavy on sessions = learning/technical. Heavy on floor and matchmaking = deal event.
4. **What does it cost to exhibit vs. attend?** A high exhibitor cost relative to ticket means it's a marketplace built for sellers.

The formation principle

The people who last in any field are deliberate about where they go and where they do not. They withdraw from rooms that want them for the wrong reasons. They spend their presence where the mission requires it, not where the invitation flatters. They do not attend every gathering they are asked to — they choose according to the work, not the invitation.

You will be invited to far more than you can attend, and the flattering invitations are often the least valuable. Selection is a discipline as much as a strategy: the judgement to know which gathering serves the work you are actually pursuing, and the freedom to decline the rest without guilt.

Application: Your candidate slate

1. List every conference you are *considering* this year.
2. Tag each with its dominant archetype.
3. For each, write one sentence: *"I would go to this to extract _____."* If you can't finish the sentence, cut it.
4. Rank by the value of that extraction against the true cost (ticket + travel + person-days). Carry the top candidates into the Go/No-Go process in Chapter Five. → **Playbook: the 30-second go/no-go gut-check (the quick version).**

CHAPTER THREE — The Three Levels of Stakeholder

Everyone in the room wants something — read it at three altitudes

A conference is not one game. It is three games stacked on top of each other, played simultaneously by people who often don't realise the other games exist. To operate well you must read all three: the **industry level** (why the sector convenes), the **organisation level** (why each company or agency sent people), and the **attendee level** (why the individual in front of you is standing here). The person who reads only one level is negotiating blind.

Level 1 — The industry level: who convenes and why

At the highest altitude, a set of standing interests keeps the conference ecosystem alive:

INDUSTRY ACTOR	WHAT THEY WANT FROM THE CONFERENCE ECOSYSTEM
Organisers (commercial & society)	Revenue, prestige, a defensible "must-attend" position, recurring exhibitors
Agencies (ESA, NASA, CNES, national)	Visibility, partner discovery, soft power, recruitment, narrative-setting
Primes (Airbus, Thales, Lockheed, Northrop…)	Supplier access, customer signalling, talent, competitive intelligence, presence
Investors / VCs	Deal flow, market read, founder access, LP signalling
Startups / SMEs	Customers, capital, credibility-by-association, hiring, partnerships
Academia / research	Collaboration, funding, dissemination, recruitment of students
Governments / regulators	Multilateral dialogue, norm-setting, industrial policy, alliance-building
Media	Stories, access, announcements, relationships with sources
Service providers (law, finance, consulting)	Clients, visibility, positioning as the trusted advisor

Knowing the industry-level interests tells you *what the event is structurally biased toward*. An event funded mainly by exhibitor fees will be structured to serve sellers. An event run by a society will protect academic content. Follow the money to predict the experience.

Level 2 — The organisation level: why your company sent people

Every organisation that buys a booth or sends a delegation has a thesis, even if it's unstated. Take a training and education institution as an example: for it, the conference is a vehicle for partnerships, grants, training revenue, recruitment, brand, and policy positioning, each with tiered objectives and an ROI calculation. Replicate that thinking for *any* org:

ORG OBJECTIVE	WHAT "SUCCESS" LOOKS LIKE	WHO THEY SEND
Sales / BD	Qualified pipeline, advanced deals, contracts	BD, account execs, sales engineers
Partnerships / corp dev	MOUs, frameworks, JV conversations	Partnerships leads, executives
Recruitment / employer brand	Qualified candidates, offer pipeline	HR, hiring managers, founders
Capital raise / IR	Investor meetings, term-sheet momentum	CEO, CFO, founders
Product / market validation	Customer feedback, demand signal	Product, marketing, founders
Competitive / market intelligence	A read on rivals, the market, the roadmap ahead	Strategy, product, leadership
Brand / thought leadership	Speaking slots, press, share of voice	Marketing, comms, executives
Policy / regulatory	Influence, intelligence, convening role	Government affairs, leadership

The strategic implication for an individual: **find out what your organisation's thesis is before you go, and make your personal plan serve it.** The attendee who returns having advanced the org's actual objective is the one whose conference budget never gets cut.

Level 3 — The attendee level: why the person in front of you is here

Underneath the org logo is a human with a private agenda that may or may not align with the badge. Reading this in the first ninety seconds of a conversation is the master skill. Common attendee archetypes:

ATTENDEE TYPE	WHAT THEY ACTUALLY WANT	HOW TO RECOGNISE THEM	HOW TO BE USEFUL
The Hunter (sales/BD)	To find and advance deals	Scans badges, asks what you do fast	Be clear about whether you're a buyer; refer if not
The Seeker (job-seeker, often quiet)	A role, a referral, a foot in the door	Asks about culture, hiring, "what's it like to…"	Make an introduction; it costs you little
The Scout (strategy/intel)	A read on the market and the competition	Asks open, probing questions, takes notes	Trade intelligence generously but guard your secrets
The Founder	Customers, capital, talent, validation	High energy, pitching, watching reactions	Give honest signal; introduce to capital or customers
The Investor	Deal flow and a market thesis	Asks about traction, market size, team	Be concise; respect their time; follow up with data
The Expert (engineer/scientist)	Peers, problems, recognition	Lights up on technical depth, allergic to fluff	Go deep or get out of the way
The Diplomat (agency/policy)	Soft power, alignment, intelligence	Careful language, attentive to status and protocol	Mind hierarchy; be a credible, neutral interlocutor
The Connector	To be the hub; social capital	Knows everyone, makes introductions	Become useful to them; they multiply your reach
The Tourist	To be seen, to learn, to enjoy	Vague objectives, collects swag	Pleasant, but don't invest your scarce time here

The discipline: in any conversation, run a fast hypothesis — *which level is this person operating on, and what do they actually want?* — and then serve that, not the pitch you rehearsed. Casciaro & Lobo's network research (2005) is blunt about why this matters: people grant access to those they *like*, and nothing makes a stranger like you faster than feeling genuinely understood.

The formation principle

The best readers of people listen past what is said to what is meant. Someone opens with a technical question when the real concern underneath it is the fear of being left behind. Someone asks about your product when the unnamed need is reassurance that they will not be embarrassed for choosing you. The surface query is rarely the real one. Never answer the badge; answer the person.

This is the whole art of the conference floor. People will tell you their organisation and their role. That's the badge. The skill — and it is a discipline of attention, not a tactic — is to listen past the badge to the person, and to be useful to *them*. Do that, and the deals, the referrals, and the relationships follow as fruit. Chase the badge, and you'll close nothing.

Application: The three-level read

Before the event, for your three highest-priority targets, write:

1. **Industry level:** What does their *type of actor* structurally want here?
2. **Org level:** What is *their organisation's* thesis for attending?
3. **Attendee level:** What might *this specific person* want — professionally and personally?

Then write one sentence on how you can be genuinely useful at the attendee level. That sentence is your opener.

CHAPTER FOUR — What Actually Happens

The anatomy of a conference, and where the value really sits

If you only attend the advertised programme, you will have a pleasant, exhausting, low-yield few days. The advertised programme is the visible 20%. The other 80% — where the deals, intelligence, and relationships live — is unscheduled and invisible to the newcomer. This chapter makes it visible.

The visible event

COMPONENT	WHAT IT'S OFFICIALLY FOR	WHAT IT'S ACTUALLY FOR
Keynotes / plenaries	Headline content, vision-setting	Watching who got the platform (a reputation signal); a shared reference everyone will discuss
Panels	Expert discussion	Positioning; panellists are advertising; the real content is who agreed to share a stage
Technical sessions / papers	Disseminating research	Recruitment, collaboration, establishing your credibility in a subfield
Expo floor / booths	Showcasing products	A controlled environment to meet anyone — the booth is a pretext for conversation
Product launches / announcements	News	Signalling timed for maximum audience; reading the *gaps* (what wasn't announced) is intelligence
B2B matchmaking	Structured meetings	The single highest-yield official mechanism — pre-booked, intentional, qualified
Networking receptions	Mingling	Where warm intros happen; lower-pressure than the floor

The invisible event — where it actually happens

This is the conference-within-the-conference, and it is mostly *not on the schedule*:

- **The side meetings.** Coffees, breakfasts, walk-and-talks booked weeks in advance. Senior people often attend a conference almost entirely for a handful of these and barely enter the hall.
- **The dinners and parties.** The hosted dinner, the company party, the invite-only suite. Access to these *is* the deal in many cases. Getting invited is a status signal and a relationship accelerant.
- **The hotel bar / lobby.** After hours, the formality drops and the real talk starts. Disproportionate value, with a corresponding discipline cost (Chapter Seven covers the bar's risks).
- **The corridor and the coffee queue.** Engineered serendipity. The seat-mate, the queue neighbour, the smoking-area conversation.
- **The "no-badge" meetings.** Senior players who book a hotel suite or nearby restaurant and meet counterparts without ever registering. The most expensive game, played by people who already know everyone.

The rule of thumb, drawn directly from the buzz research: **the value of a conference is roughly proportional to the time you spend in unstructured, high-quality interaction — not in seats facing a stage.** Sessions are where you *generate reasons* to have those interactions ("I saw your talk on…"), not where the value is captured.

The rhythm of the days

Conferences have a predictable energy curve, and matching your strategy to it is a real edge:

PHASE	ENERGY	WHAT TO DO
Eve-of / registration	Fresh, open	Pre-event mixers; lowest-competition networking of the whole event
Day 1 morning	Peak energy, formal	Keynotes for the shared reference; book your high-value meetings here while people are sharp
Day 1 afternoon	Settling	Floor walking, booth visits, opportunistic conversations
Day 1 evening	The real event	Dinners, parties — this is where relationships deepen
Day 2	Productive, thinning	Best day for focused meetings; crowds lighter, conversations longer
Final afternoon	Draining fast	People leave early; wrap up, confirm next steps, don't start new threads

The formation principle

The visible work and the invisible work each have their proper proportion. The keynote draws thousands and creates the conditions. But the formation — the trust, the alliances, the people who will later vouch for you — happens in the unscheduled hours: the corridor, the shared meal, the question on the walk back, the quiet debrief after the crowd has dispersed. Do not mistake the platform for the work. The platform creates the conditions; the work happens off-stage.

Plan your conference the same way. Use the sessions to create reasons and surface area. Do the real work in the small, unscheduled rooms. And guard your energy for the evening, because that is when the relationships are actually made.

Application: The two-column agenda

For each conference day, build a two-column plan:

- **Left column (visible):** The 2–3 sessions worth attending and *why* (the reference they give you, the person they let you meet).
- **Right column (invisible):** The meetings, meals, and unstructured windows — booked or protected — where the real work happens.

If your right column is empty, you have planned a holiday, not a campaign.

CHAPTER FIVE — Go / No-Go

The discipline of not attending

The most expensive conference mistake is not behaving badly at one. It is attending the wrong one — burning budget, time, and energy on an event that was never going to produce your outcomes. Selection is where conference ROI is won or lost, and it is won *before* you ever leave. This chapter gives you the decision framework. → **Playbook: the 30-second go/no-go gut-check (the quick version).**

The weighted decision model

You cannot decide go/no-go on vibes. You decide it on a weighted score against your actual objectives. The model is simple: a set of criteria, each weighted by importance to your strategy, each scored 1–5 for the specific event, multiplied out to a total that maps to a decision band. The criteria below are a starting set — replace them with your own objectives.

CRITERION (EXAMPLE)	WHY IT MATTERS	WEIGHT (1–10)	SCORE (1–5)
Decision-maker density	Are the people who can say yes actually there?	9	
Funder / customer presence	Are the specific orgs you need confirmed?	10	
Activation opportunity (speaking/booth)	Can you create platform and surface area?	9	
Target-account density	How many of your named targets attend?	8	
Network presence (alumni/warm ties)	Do you have warm intros into the room?	6	
Cost efficiency (value per €)	True cost vs. expected return	7	
Competitive presence	Do you need to be seen where rivals are?	5	
Strategic / policy fit	Does it serve your positioning thesis?	8	

Multiply weight × score for each, sum, and map to a decision band (e.g. *Strong Go / Conditional Go / Low Priority / No-Go*). The point of the model is not the number — it is forcing you to *name your weights*, which is to say, name your strategy.

The Conditional Go — the most useful verdict

The most valuable output of the model is rarely a clean yes or no. It is the **Conditional Go**: *attend only if a specific condition is met.* A good example — "attend IF (1) a speaking slot is secured OR (2) a minimum of three meetings are pre-booked; otherwise, remote follow-up only." This converts a vague hope ("it might be useful") into a falsifiable bet ("it is useful if and only if X"). If the condition can't be met, you don't go, and you've saved the budget without regret.

Role-based go/no-go heuristics

The right event depends entirely on what you are. Quick heuristics:

IF YOU ARE...	PRIORITISE	BE SCEPTICAL OF
A job-seeker / newcomer	Flagship + Technical events with recruitment and student presence; low-cost local events	Expensive executive summits where you can't get a meeting
A founder raising capital	Executive summits and deal floors where investors concentrate	Pure technical conferences with no capital in the room
A founder seeking customers	Deal floors, trade expos, and the events *your customers* attend (not the ones you enjoy)	Events full of peers/competitors but no buyers
An engineer / researcher	Technical conferences with peer review and your subfield	Glossy commercial summits light on substance
A BD / sales lead	B2B matchmaking events with structured meetings	Events with no pre-booking mechanism
An investor	Where founders and LPs concentrate; executive summits	Broad expos with low signal density
A corporate / strategy lead	Flagships (for the full read) + the one executive summit in your domain	Attending everything; better to go deep on few
A policy / agency professional	Diplomatic forums, flagships, and bilateral-rich events	Pure commercial expos with no policy track

When *not* to go (no matter the score)

- When you have no specific, named outcome you can articulate.
- When the people who can deliver your outcome will not be there (verify, don't assume).
- When you cannot get into the *invisible* event (no meetings, no dinners, no warm ties) and the event's value lives there.
- When the true cost (especially senior person-days) exceeds the realistic expected return — run the ROI before you book.
- When you'd be going out of FOMO. FOMO is not a strategy; it is the absence of one.

The portfolio view

No single event decision should be made in isolation. The mature approach is to manage conferences as a *portfolio* against an annual budget, balancing big-bet flagships against cheap high-yield local events, and tracking blended ROI across the year. One overspent flagship can be justified if the portfolio nets out.

The formation principle

The disciplined builder counts the cost before committing — sitting down first to reckon whether the resources are there to finish the tower, rather than laying a foundation they cannot complete. The instinct to commit before counting — to say yes to the impressive invitation, to attend because everyone attends — is precisely the instinct to distrust. Counting the cost is not timidity; it is stewardship of resources entrusted to you.

Saying no to the wrong conference is how you afford the right one. The budget you protect by declining three low-yield events is the budget that sends you to the one that changes your year.

Application: Run one real go/no-go

Take your top candidate from Chapter Two and run it fully through the model: name your criteria and weights, score the event honestly, total it, and write the decision — including, if relevant, the *condition* attached to a Conditional Go. Then do the ROI math on true cost vs. realistic

return. → **Playbook: the 30-second go/no-go gut-check, as a first filter.**

CHAPTER SIX — The Months Before

The conference is won in the run-up, not the room

The single most reliable predictor of conference outcome is the quality of preparation in the weeks before. The amateur shows up and hopes. The professional arrives with meetings booked, targets researched, materials prepared, and a clear thesis — and treats the days on-site as *execution*, not discovery. This chapter is the run-up playbook, organised by timeline and by role. → **Playbook: 1 · Prep.**

The universal timeline

WHEN	DO
8–12 weeks out	Confirm go (Ch. 5). Submit any speaking/talk proposals — these deadlines are early. Block the dates and budget.
6–8 weeks out	Build your target list. Research who's attending. Set tiered objectives (P1 must / P2 should / P3 nice).
4–6 weeks out	Begin outreach to priority targets. Register on the matchmaking platform. Draft your talk tracks by audience.
2–4 weeks out	Book meetings aggressively. Reactivate dormant ties ("I'll be at X — worth a coffee?"). Prepare materials and one-pagers.
1 week out	Confirm every booked meeting. Brief any colleagues/leadership. Test your contact-capture method. Logistics locked.
Day before	Pack (cards, chargers, materials), do an alignment huddle if attending as a team, review your top targets one last time.

Tiered objectives — the discipline that makes the rest work

Before anything else, set objectives in three tiers:

- **P1 — Must achieve** (non-negotiable; these justify the trip cost). E.g. "two grant-relevant conversations," "one partnership framework discussion initiated."
- **P2 — Should achieve** (strong value). E.g. "reconnect with 10 alumni," "five qualified leads."
- **P3 — Nice to have.** E.g. "one press mention," "one new collaborator identified."

These objectives are not just a plan — they become your *debrief scorecard* afterward (Chapter Eight). Set targets you can count.

The target hit list

For each priority target, research and record: name, org/role, opportunity type, relationship warmth (cold/warm/hot), whether a meeting is booked, your tailored talk track, and your desired concrete outcome. A simple table with exactly these columns is all you need. The act of researching each target *before* you meet them is what separates a memorable conversation from a forgettable one. Granovetter's weak-tie research and the dormant-tie literature (Levin, Walter & Murnighan, 2011) both point the same way: the highest-yield outreach is often to people you *already loosely know* but haven't spoken to recently. The conference is the perfect, low-pressure reason to reactivate them.

The pre-conference outreach message

A good pre-event message is short, specific, and makes saying yes easy:

> *Subject: At [Conference] — worth 20 minutes?*
>
> *Hi [Name], I'll be at [Conference] on [dates]. I've been following [specific thing they/their org is doing], and I'd value 20 minutes to [specific, modest purpose — learn how you approach X / explore whether there's a fit on Y]. I know the schedule's brutal — happy to work around you, even a coffee between sessions. Worth a slot?*

Do **not**: send identical messages to fifty people, ask for a job in the first message, attach a deck unprompted, or write three paragraphs when three sentences work.

Run-up playbooks by role

Job-seeker / newcomer. Identify the 10 organisations you'd most want to work for who'll be there. Find the *working professionals* (not HR) doing the job you want, and request informational conversations — framed as learning, not asking for a job. Prepare a crisp answer to "what are you looking for?" Have a one-line story of who you are. Line up warm intros through any alumni or mutual contacts.

Founder (raising). Build the investor target list; research each fund's thesis and check size. Get warm intros — cold pitching on the floor converts poorly. Prepare a 30-second and a 3-minute version. Line up customer references you can name. Book meetings; don't rely on bumping into people.

Founder (selling / validating). Identify the actual *buyers* attending (not peers). Prepare 3–5 discovery questions to test demand, not just pitch. Book customer conversations. Decide what signal would confirm or kill a hypothesis.

Engineer / researcher. Read the programme; identify the sessions and people at the edge of your problem. Prepare specific questions for specific authors. If presenting, rehearse and prepare for the recruitment conversations your talk will trigger.

BD / sales. Work the matchmaking platform hard — pre-book the maximum. Qualify targets in advance (budget, authority, need, timeline). Prepare audience-specific talk tracks. Align with marketing on materials and follow-up.

Investor. Pre-screen the startups presenting; request meetings with the few worth your time. Prepare your thesis questions. Decide what you're trying to learn about the market, not just which deals to chase.

Corporate / strategy / intelligence. Define your intelligence questions in advance (Chapter Seven). Identify which competitors and customers will be present and what you want to learn. Brief your team on collection priorities — and on what *not* to disclose (counter-intelligence; Chapter Seven).

The formation principle

Good leaders never send their people out to improvise. They prepare them deliberately — where to go, what to carry, what to say, what to do if they are not received — and they build the debrief on return into the method from the start. The commissioning is deliberate, the brief is clear, and the reflection afterward is part of the design, not an afterthought.

Preparation is not the opposite of presence; it is what *frees* you to be present. The person who has done the run-up work arrives calm, attentive, and able to listen — because they are executing a plan, not anxiously inventing one. Do the work before, so you can be fully there during.

Application: Build the pre-conference plan

For your committed event, complete: (1) tiered P1/P2/P3 objectives with countable targets; (2) a target hit list of 8–12 names with warmth and desired outcomes; (3) a pre-departure checklist with owners and dates; (4) audience-specific talk tracks. → **Playbook: 1 · Prep (targets and scripts).**

CHAPTER SEVEN — On the Ground

The art of the room: approaching strangers, asking well, working with discipline

This is the chapter most people want first and should read last, because technique without the preparation and judgement of the prior chapters is just charm with no destination. But the room has its own craft, and this chapter is the craft: how to approach a stranger, how to ask questions that open people up, how to gather intelligence and protect your own, and how to last three days without burning out.

Approaching a stranger — the mechanics

The fear of approaching strangers is universal and the research on it is reassuring: people consistently *underestimate* how much others enjoy talking to them and how positively a conversation will go (Boothby et al., 2018, "The Liking Gap," *Psychological Science*). The stranger is almost always more receptive than your anxiety predicts.

The approach, step by step:

1. **Read the formation.** Two people locked in conversation, leaning in = do not interrupt. An open triangle, someone alone scanning the room, a lull at a booth = open. Approach the open ones.
2. **Open with low-stakes truth, not a pitch.** "Mind if I join you?" / "How's your conference going?" / "What brought you to this session?" The badge and the setting give you everything you need.
3. **Find the thread fast.** Listen for the hook — their org, their problem, a shared session — and pull it. "You're at [org] — are you working on [the thing they're known for]?"
4. **Give your name and a one-line identity early**, then return the focus to them. People remember how you made them feel, not your job title.
5. **Decide quickly if this is a match.** If it's not, exit gracefully and generously (below). Your scarce resource is time; spend it on fit.

The graceful exit

You need to leave conversations without rudeness. Master a few:

- "I don't want to monopolise you — it was great to meet you. Can I grab your details and follow up?"
- "I promised myself I'd catch [session/person] — let's continue by email. What's the best address?"
- The generous exit: introduce them to someone before you go. "You should meet [name] — you're both working on [X]." You leave *and* deposit goodwill.

Asking good questions — the master skill, at every level

The quality of your conference is the quality of your questions. A good question does three things: it makes the other person feel understood, it surfaces information you couldn't get otherwise, and it positions you as someone worth talking to again. The research on question-asking (Huang et al., 2017, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*) is striking: people who ask more questions — especially *follow-up* questions — are liked more and learn more. Below is a question bank organised by the level you're operating on.

Professional questions (understand their work and world): - "What are you actually working on right now — and what's the hard part?" - "What's changed most in your corner of the sector this year?" - "What would make this conference a win for you?"

Personal questions (build the human relationship — use sparingly and genuinely): - "How did you end up in space? What was the path?" - "What's the part of the work you'd do even if no one paid you?" - "What are you hoping to figure out this year — for yourself, not just the job?"

Product questions (you're evaluating or learning about an offering): - "Who is this really built for — and who isn't it for?" - "What's the thing customers ask for that you've deliberately said no to?" - "Where does it break? What's the edge of what it can do today?"

Career questions (you're a seeker, or building your own path): - "If you were starting over in this sector today, what would you do differently?" - "What does someone need to be good at to thrive on your team — beyond the obvious?" - "Who else should I be talking to about this?" *(the single highest-yield question at any conference — it compounds your network through theirs)*

Intelligence questions (you're gathering market/competitive insight — open, never interrogative): - "What are you hearing about where the funding's going next year?" - "Who do you think is doing the most interesting work in [adjacent area] right now?" - "What's the thing everyone's talking about here that you think is overhyped — or underrated?" - "What surprised you at this event?"

Counter-intelligence awareness (protecting your own information — this is posture, not a question): - Assume the friendly stranger asking detailed questions about your roadmap, pricing, customers, or capacity may be a competitor or their proxy. This is normal and not sinister — you should be doing the same. Decide *before* the event what is public, what is shareable under relationship, and what is confidential. Have a smooth deflection ready: "We're not talking about that publicly yet, but I'd love to hear how *you're* thinking about it." Never disclose customer names, unannounced products, pricing logic, or capacity constraints to someone you can't place. In a sector this small, today's curious stranger is tomorrow's competitor, partner, or hire — be discreet, not paranoid.

Market / validation questions (you're testing demand): - "How are you solving [problem] today? What does that cost you?" - "If something did [your value prop], would that change anything for you — or is it a vitamin, not a painkiller?" - "Who in your org would actually feel this pain? Who'd hold the budget?" - "What would have to be true for you to switch?"

The meta-skill: **listen far more than you talk, and make your questions follow-ups.** The person who leaves a conversation having mostly listened is the one the other person wants to see again.

Booth and floor discipline (if you're exhibiting)

- Never sit, never bury your face in your phone, never cluster with colleagues. An occupied-looking booth repels approach.
- Open with a question, not a pitch: "What brings you to the show?" beats "Let me tell you about our product."
- Qualify fast and route: a real prospect gets time; a tourist gets a friendly card and release.
- Capture every real lead immediately (below).

Capture or lose it — the five-minute rule

Memory decays catastrophically at conferences; by evening you'll have merged three people into one. The rule is simple: **capture within five minutes of each meaningful conversation** — name, org/role, opportunity type, the next step, and the owner. Voice-note first if you must, fill the form after. A "send me something" is a buying signal — flag that contact hot and follow up within 24 hours, not two weeks. → **Playbook: 2 · Floor (capture log).**

Energy, presence, and the bar

A multi-day conference is an endurance event. The most common failure on the ground is not bad technique — it is depletion. By day two afternoon, exhausted attendees make poor reads, weak asks, and forgettable impressions.

- **Protect your energy like a budget.** Schedule recovery. You cannot be present for thirty conversations; you can for ten.
- **The hotel bar is high-value and high-risk.** The relaxed evening conversation builds relationships fast — but the sector is small, reputations are durable, and the bar has ended more careers than it has made. Be the person who was warm, present, and remembered well — not the cautionary tale. Drink less than you want to.
- **Quality over quantity, always.** Five deep conversations with clear next steps beat fifty cards. It is a golden rule; it is the truest thing in this guide.

The formation principle

The most effective people approach strangers constantly — including the ones their peers avoid — and never as a pitch. The approach is a question, an act of attention, a genuine interest in the person that disarms and dignifies them. And the question they ask is the one underneath the question: not the surface query but the real need beneath it.

The whole craft of the room reduces to this: *be genuinely interested in the person in front of you.* Not as a technique — people detect performed interest instantly — but as a discipline of attention that treats each conversation as worth your full presence. Do that, and you will be the rare person at the conference everyone remembers warmly. That memory is the asset. Everything else compounds from it.

Application: The room kit

Prepare and rehearse, before you go: (1) three openers you'll actually use; (2) three graceful exits; (3) a tailored question set drawn from the bank above for each of your target types; (4) your pre-decided public / shareable / confidential lines for counter-intelligence; (5) your five-minute capture method, tested on your phone. → **Playbook: 2 · Floor.**

CHAPTER EIGHT — The Days and Weeks After

Where the ROI is actually realised — and where most people fail

Here is the brutal truth of conferences: **the value is created on the floor but realised in the follow-up, and most people don't follow up.** They return exhausted, drop the stack of cards on the desk, intend to "get to it next week," and the warm relationships cool to nothing. The entire investment — the budget, the days, the conversations — is forfeited in the one week when a few hours of disciplined work would have captured it. This chapter is that work. → **Playbook: 3 · Follow-up.**

The 72-hour window

Speed is the whole game. The contact who was excited to meet you on Tuesday is, by the following Monday, buried under their own backlog and fading memory. The rule is non-negotiable: **send follow-up emails within 72 hours, maximum** — and within 24 hours for any "hot" contact who asked you to send something.

A good follow-up is specific and easy to act on:

> *Hi [Name], great to meet you at [Conference] — I enjoyed our conversation about [specific thing]. As promised, [the specific thing: the link, the intro, the one-pager]. [One clear next step: "Would [date] work for a 30-minute call to explore [X]?"] Thanks again — [you].*

Reference something only the two of you discussed. Deliver whatever you promised. Propose one concrete next step. That's it.

The debrief — turn the trip into intelligence

Within 48 hours, before memory fades, run a structured debrief against the objectives you set in Chapter Six. This is Kolb's reflective-observation stage made operational: the experience without the debrief is just an expensive trip; the debrief is where it becomes learning and pipeline. Structure it like this:

- **Objective scorecard.** For each P1/P2/P3 objective: target vs. actual, % achieved, quality (1–5), notes. Be honest — this is how you get better and how you justify next year's budget.
- **Cost vs. return.** Total true cost (registration + travel + hotel + meals + *staff days*) against estimated pipeline value generated. Compute the ROI ratio. Even one grant or training contract can return 10× a trip's cost — but only if you *track* it.
- **Follow-up tracker.** Every contact needing action, with the required action, deadline, owner, and status. This is the bridge from "met someone" to "closed something."
- **Lessons learned.** What worked, what to do differently, and the explicit next-year recommendation: attend / don't / conditional, with rationale. This feeds straight back into next year's Go/No-Go (Chapter Five).

Follow-up playbooks by role

Job-seeker. Send tailored thank-yous within 24–48 hours. Connect on LinkedIn with a personal note referencing the conversation. For anyone who offered a referral or intro, make it *easy* for them — send a short blurb they can forward. Track every lead and its status; job pipelines die from neglect, not rejection.

Founder (raising). Send the promised materials (deck, data room link) same-day to any interested investor — momentum is everything in a raise. Log every conversation's temperature. Sequence follow-ups so interested funds feel motion without being spammed.

Founder (selling / validating). Synthesise what you heard *across* conversations — the pattern is the insight, not any single chat. Did the market validate or kill your hypothesis? Feed it into product. Follow up with qualified buyers with a specific next step.

BD / sales. Route every lead into the CRM with a clear stage and owner same-week. Prioritise hot contacts for 24-hour follow-up. Hand off as needed but keep accountability — leads with no owner die.

Investor. Update your pipeline and notes. Send the few founders worth more time a concrete next step. Capture your *market* read while it's fresh — that's often the real value of the trip.

Corporate / strategy / intelligence. Write the intelligence brief while it's fresh: what you learned about competitors, customers, the market, and the narrative. Distribute to the people who need it. This is the deliverable that justifies the trip internally.

The formation principle

The debrief belongs in the method from the start. The most effective practitioners, when their people return from being sent out, gather them first and ask what happened — what they saw, what they did, what they learned. The going out is incomplete without the coming back and the reflection. The experience is not the lesson; the debrief is where the lesson gets named and the capacity is formed.

A conference without a debrief and follow-up is an experience you paid for and threw away. The few hours in the week after — the thank-yous, the scorecard, the brief — are not administrative cleanup. They are where the entire investment either compounds or evaporates. Be the rare person who does this work. It is most of the edge.

Application: The 72-hour protocol

Block, *before you leave for the conference*, three calendar windows in the week after: (1) a 2-hour follow-up block within 72 hours of return; (2) a 1-hour debrief block within 48 hours; (3) a 30-minute "hot contacts within 24 hours" block for the day after you're back. Protected time is the only thing that makes follow-up actually happen. → **Playbook: 3 · Follow-up (10-minute debrief).**

CHAPTER NINE — Strategic Positioning

The same conference, played for ten different objectives

A conference is a multi-purpose instrument, and most people play it for only one purpose (usually a vague "networking") when it could serve many simultaneously. This chapter is a set of lenses: how to position — online, in person, at the company level, and for each strategic objective. Read the lens that matches your goal; a sophisticated operator plays two or three at once without letting them collide.

Positioning online (before, during, after)

The conference is no longer confined to the venue; a parallel event runs on LinkedIn and X, and it reaches people who never attend. To position online:

- **Before:** Announce you're attending and *what you're interested in* — this triggers inbound meeting requests. Comment on the event's content and on attendees' posts. Engage speakers before you meet them.
- **During:** Post a sharp observation or two — not "great panel!" but a genuine insight that demonstrates you understand the sector. Tag thoughtfully. A single substantive post can outperform ten conversations for reach.
- **After:** Share a synthesis — "Three things I took from [Conference]." This positions you as a thinker, gives your new contacts a reason to engage, and compounds the trip's reach for weeks.

The principle: your online presence is the *amplifier* of your physical presence, not a substitute. The people who win combine both — they're memorable in the room *and* visible in the feed.

Positioning in person

Your in-person positioning is the sum of small signals: how you introduce yourself (a sharp one-liner beats a job title), whether you're seen in the right rooms, whether you give before you ask, whether you're calm or frantic. The strongest positioning is *generosity at altitude* — being the person who makes useful introductions and shares intelligence freely. Connectors accrue disproportionate social capital (Ch. 3); become one.

Positioning at the company level

If you represent an organisation, the company's positioning is set by deliberate choices: speaking slots (thought leadership), booth presence and design (seriousness and scale), sponsorship (status), the party or dinner you host (access and goodwill), and the consistency of message across every person wearing the badge. A scattered delegation with no shared talk track dilutes the brand; an aligned one amplifies it. → **Playbook: the scripts in 1 · Prep** (the discipline of a shared opener and audience-specific pitches).

Positioning for each strategic objective

OBJECTIVE	WHAT TO DO AT THE CONFERENCE	THE SIGNAL OF SUCCESS
Products	Demo to real users; gather reactions; time launches for the event's audience	Qualified interest, feedback that changes the roadmap
R&D	Attend technical sessions at the edge; meet researchers; scout collaborators and talent	New collaborations, awareness of the state of the art, hires
Competitive analysis	Walk every relevant booth; attend rivals' talks; read what they announce *and what they don't*	A clear, current read on competitors' direction and gaps
Market analysis	Sample many conversations across the value chain; track the narrative and where capital is flowing	A grounded thesis on where the market is heading
Customer validation	Run discovery conversations (Ch. 7 market questions); test hypotheses, not pitches	Validated or killed assumptions; named pains and budget-holders
Investor relations	Concentrate on events where capital is dense; warm intros; concise, data-backed conversations	Investor meetings advanced; term-sheet momentum
Personal career	Informational conversations; visibility in your subfield; the "who else should I talk to" question	Referrals, a foot in the door, an expanded strategic network
Personal interest	Follow genuine curiosity; attend the talk that excites you; meet people you admire	Energy, perspective, the renewal that sustains a long career

The art is sequencing and separation: you can run customer validation *and* competitive analysis *and* personal-career positioning at one event, but you must not, for instance, pump a competitor for intelligence while pitching them as a potential partner. Decide which hat you're wearing in each conversation, and don't mix incompatible ones.

The formation principle

The people whose positioning lasts are never one thing to one audience and a contradiction to another. To the scholar they speak as a scholar, to the engineer as an engineer, to the newcomer as a friend — meeting each in their own language — yet they are the same person throughout, and that consistency is itself the credibility. People can tell when someone speaks with real authority, because the positioning is not a performance layered over a hollow centre. It is the natural expression of a coherent self.

This is the deepest principle of positioning. Tailor your message to each audience — the grant officer and the customer should not hear the same pitch — but let it all flow from one true centre. The professional who positions strategically *and* with integrity becomes, over a small sector and a long career, simply *known and trusted*. That reputation is worth more than any single deal, and it is the only positioning that compounds for thirty years.

Application: The positioning matrix

For your next conference, pick your top three strategic objectives from the table above. For each, write: the specific actions you'll take, the conversations or rooms required, and the signal that would tell you it worked. Then check for collisions — any two objectives that can't share a conversation — and plan to keep them separate.

CHAPTER TEN — Trends

Reading where the conference ecosystem itself is heading

The conference landscape is not static, and the professional who reads its trajectory selects and positions better than one who treats this year like last year. These are the durable shifts — verify their current state, but expect the directions to hold.

- **Hybrid and digital layers are permanent.** Matchmaking platforms, event apps, and parallel online discourse are now core, not bolt-ons. The best operators work the digital layer as hard as the physical (Ch. 9). But the *physical premium* has risen, not fallen — scarcity made presence more valuable (Ch. 1).
- **Commercial and NewSpace gravity.** The centre of gravity continues to shift from purely institutional/agency events toward commercial, investment, and NewSpace-flavoured gatherings, reflecting the sector's capital and growth. Deal floors and executive summits proliferate.
- **Dual-use and defence convergence.** National-security space, space domain awareness, and resilience are an expanding share of programming and budget — and an expanding share of conference content, often in restricted or cleared tracks. For dual-use ventures this is where customers and capital increasingly concentrate.
- **Verticalisation.** Alongside the big flagships, sharply focused events are multiplying — Earth observation, in-orbit servicing, lunar, propulsion, space sustainability/debris, position-navigation-timing. Niche events often deliver higher signal density for a specific objective than a sprawling flagship.
- **Sustainability scrutiny.** Both the sustainability *of space* (debris, traffic management) as a content theme and the sustainability *of conferences themselves* (travel footprint, justification of attendance) are rising — sharpening the go/no-go discipline.
- **Matchmaking professionalised.** Pre-booked B2B meeting systems are becoming the expected mechanism; events without them lose ground. This rewards preparation (Ch. 6) and punishes the show-up-and-hope approach.
- **Talent and workforce as headline content.** As the sector grows faster than its workforce, recruitment, training, and workforce development are moving from side rooms to main stages — an opportunity for anyone positioning around talent.

The formation principle

It is a strange and common failure to read the sky for tomorrow's weather and yet miss the signs of one's own moment. Discernment of the moment — seeing what is actually shifting beneath the familiar surface — is a form of wisdom. To operate as though this year is last year is a failure of attention.

Read the trends not to chase novelty but to steward your limited resources toward where the work is actually moving. The professional who sees the shift early — toward the dual-use room, the verticalised niche, the commercial summit — is positioned before the crowd arrives, which is the only time positioning is cheap.

Application: The annual trend scan

Once a year, before you plan your conference portfolio, write half a page: What is shifting in this sector's gatherings — in content themes, in where capital and decision-makers concentrate, in formats? Adjust your portfolio (Ch. 5) accordingly. Carry this into the Year-by-Year architecture in Chapter Twelve.

CHAPTER ELEVEN — Cheat Sheets

The consolidated reference — for the night before and the morning of

Everything in this guide, compressed. Photograph these pages.

The master do / don't

DO	DON'T
Set countable objectives before you go	Show up with a vague hope to "network"
Pre-book your highest-value meetings	Rely on bumping into the people who matter
Research every priority target	Wing the conversation cold
Spend your time in the *invisible* event	Sit in sessions all day and call it working
Ask questions and listen	Pitch at people
End every conversation with a specific next step	Say "let's stay in touch" and mean nothing
Capture each contact within 5 minutes	Trust your memory until the evening
Follow up within 72 hours (24h for hot)	Drop the cards on your desk for "next week"
Give before you ask	Extract without contributing
Protect your energy; go deep on a few	Collect fifty shallow business cards
Decide your confidential lines in advance	Volunteer your roadmap to a friendly stranger
Debrief honestly against your objectives	Skip the debrief and lose the learning

Approaching a stranger — the 5 steps

1. Read the formation (open vs. closed) — approach the open.
2. Open with low-stakes truth: "How's your conference going?"
3. Find the thread fast — pull on their org or a shared session.
4. Give your name + one-line identity, then return focus to them.
5. Decide fit quickly; if no, exit graciously and generously.

Graceful exits

- "I don't want to monopolise you — can I follow up by email?"
- "I promised myself I'd catch [X] — let's continue another way."
- The generous exit: introduce them to someone, then leave.

The question bank, by level

- **Professional:** "What are you working on — and what's the hard part?"
- **Personal:** "How did you end up in space?"
- **Product:** "Who is this *not* for? Where does it break?"
- **Career:** "Who else should I be talking to?" *(highest-yield question)*
- **Intelligence:** "What's overhyped here? What's underrated?"
- **Counter-intel:** Deflect smoothly — "Not public yet; how are *you* thinking about it?"
- **Market/validation:** "How do you solve this today, and what does it cost you?"

The follow-up template

> *Great to meet you at [Conference] — enjoyed our talk about [specific]. As promised, [the thing]. Would [date] work for [specific next step]? Thanks — [you].*

The golden rules (worth memorising)

1. **Always end with a specific next step.** Get a yes to "Can I email you Tuesday?"
2. **Capture within 5 minutes.** Voice-note if needed; memory decays fast.
3. **"Send me something" = a hot buying signal.** Follow up within 24 hours.
4. **Listen first, then tailor.** The most powerful words are their name + their problem.
5. **Warm intros beat cold approaches.** Ask: "Do you know anyone from [target] here?"
6. **Quality over quantity.** Five deep conversations with next steps beat twenty cards.

The pre-flight one-pager (the morning of)

- My P1 objectives today: _____
- My 3 must-meet people today: _____
- My booked meetings (time/place): _____
- My one-line identity: _____
- My confidential / shareable / public lines: _____
- Capture method tested: ☐ Cards/charger packed: ☐
- Tonight's high-value evening event: _____

CHAPTER TWELVE — The Five-Year Conference Architecture

Building a conference presence that compounds

Any single conference is a tactic. A *career* of conferences, played deliberately, is a system — and like all the systems in these field guides, the returns compound. The professional who shows up randomly each year, network resetting to near-zero, gets a fraction of the return of the one who builds presence intentionally over five years. This chapter sequences that build. Adapt it to your stage; the principle is compounding.

YEAR ONE — Orientation: learn the terrain

- Attend one flagship and one low-cost local/technical event. Go to *observe the mechanism* (Ch. 1) as much as to extract.
- Build your first target lists and run the full pre/during/post discipline once, even clumsily. The reps matter more than the polish.
- Start a single running document: every meaningful contact, where you met, what you discussed, the follow-up. This becomes your most valuable asset by Year Five.
- Identify the 3–5 events that actually matter for your specific objectives. Stop attending on FOMO.
- Find one person a level or two ahead who navigates conferences well. Watch how they work a room.

YEAR TWO — Reliability: become a known face

- Return to your core 2–3 events. *Returning* is what builds relationships — the second hello is worth ten first hellos.
- Reactivate dormant ties from Year One *before* each event ("I'll be at X — coffee?").
- Make your first deliberate introductions between people in your network. Begin becoming a Connector.
- Submit your first speaking/talk proposal, even a small one. Platform creates surface area.
- Run an honest annual debrief: which events earned their cost? Cut the ones that didn't.

YEAR THREE — Platform: be seen and sought

- Secure at least one speaking slot or panel at a core event. Position around the theme you want to be known for.
- Build your online positioning around your physical presence (Ch. 9) — become visible in the feed *and* the room.
- Host or co-host something small — a dinner, a meetup, a breakfast. Hosting converts you from attendee to node.
- Begin mentoring someone newer through their first conferences. Teaching consolidates your own mastery.
- Run a real portfolio: balance flagship bets against high-yield niche events; track blended ROI.

YEAR FOUR — Leverage: convene rather than attend

- You should now be invited more than you apply. Select ruthlessly; the flattering invitations are often the least valuable.
- Use your position to make high-value introductions — your network is now a resource others seek access to.
- Run the *invisible* event deliberately: the side meetings and dinners are now where your conferences happen; the hall is secondary.
- Read and act on the trends (Ch. 10) ahead of the crowd — be in the emerging room before it's crowded.
- Begin building the conference *strategy* for your organisation or venture, not just your personal plan.

YEAR FIVE — Commissioning: build it for others

- Conduct a full five-year review: how has your network's quality and reach changed? Has presence compounded, or just accumulated?
- Identify the people you've helped through their first conferences. Open doors for them — introductions, recommendations, invitations.
- Codify what you've learned into something transferable — a playbook for your team or successors (this guide is one example).
- Ask the question underneath the question: across five years, what has all this presence been *for*? Not what it produced — what it was for.
- Steward your platform toward the mission, not just your own advancement.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN — The Research Foundation

Sources and further reading for the serious practitioner

The frameworks in this guide draw on research in economic geography, network science, signalling theory, sales and marketing science, social psychology, and competitive-intelligence practice — and on the operational discipline encoded in the companion *Conference Playbook*.

Conferences, trade fairs, and temporary clusters

- **Maskell, P., Bathelt, H. & Malmberg, A. (2006).** Building Global Knowledge Pipelines: The Role of Temporary Clusters. *European Planning Studies*, 14(8), 997–1013. The foundational work on conferences and trade fairs as temporary clusters generating "global buzz."

- **Bathelt, H. & Schuldt, N. (2008).** Between Luminaires and Meat Grinders: International Trade Fairs as Temporary Clusters. *Regional Studies*, 42(6), 853–868. How trade fairs function as periodic, intense knowledge-exchange events.
- **Borghini, S., Golfetto, F. & Rinallo, D. (2006).** Ongoing Search Among Industrial Buyers. *Journal of Business Research*. On how professionals use trade shows for continuous market scanning.

Signalling, trust, and the value of presence

- **Spence, M. (1973).** Job Market Signaling. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 87(3), 355–374. The foundation of signalling theory — why costly signals (like physical presence) are credible.
- **Storper, M. & Venables, A.J. (2004).** Buzz: Face-to-Face Contact and the Urban Economy. *Journal of Economic Geography*, 4(4), 351–370. Why face-to-face contact remains economically irreplaceable.

Networks and social capital

- **Granovetter, M.S. (1973).** The Strength of Weak Ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360–1380. Why acquaintances, not close friends, deliver new opportunities.
- **Burt, R.S. (2004).** Structural Holes and Good Ideas. *American Journal of Sociology*, 110(2), 349–399. The broker advantage — why connecting otherwise-separate groups pays.
- **Levin, D.Z., Walter, J. & Murnighan, J.K. (2011).** Dormant Ties: The Value of Reconnecting. *Organization Science*, 22(4), 923–939. Why reactivating dormant contacts is unusually high-yield — the basis of pre-conference outreach.
- **Casciaro, T. & Lobo, M.S. (2005).** Competent Jerks, Lovable Fools, and the Formation of Social Networks. *Harvard Business Review*, June 2005. Why being liked precedes being respected in network access.
- **Grant, A. (2013).** *Give and Take*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. The research on strategic generosity as the durable networking strategy.

Conversation, questions, and approaching strangers

- **Huang, K., Yeomans, M., Brooks, A.W., Minson, J. & Gino, F. (2017).** It Doesn't Hurt to Ask: Question-Asking Increases Liking. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 113(3), 430–452. Why question-asking — especially follow-ups — makes you both liked and informed.
- **Boothby, E.J., Cooney, G., Sandstrom, G.M. & Clark, M.S. (2018).** The Liking Gap in Conversations. *Psychological Science*, 29(11), 1742–1756. Why strangers like you more than you fear they do.
- **Sandstrom, G.M. & Dunn, E.W. (2014).** Social Interactions and Well-Being: The Surprising Power of Weak Ties. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(7), 910–922. The value (and pleasure) of interactions with weak ties.

Sales, validation, and discovery

- **Rackham, N. (1988).** *SPIN Selling.* McGraw-Hill. The discipline of asking before pitching — the foundation of discovery and validation conversations.
- **Fitzpatrick, R. (2013).** *The Mom Test.* On asking customer-validation questions that surface truth rather than politeness.

Competitive and counter-intelligence (ethical practice)

- **Fleisher, C.S. & Bensoussan, B.E. (2015).** *Business and Competitive Analysis.* 2nd ed. Pearson. The standard text on ethical, structured competitive intelligence — including trade-show collection and source protection.

Learning and the debrief

- **Kolb, D.A. (1984).** *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development.* Prentice Hall. The four-stage cycle; the post-conference debrief *is* the reflective-observation stage institutionalised.

Operational companion

- **Conference Playbook (web page, at pconpiee.github.io).** The lean companion implementing this guide's discipline in the order of the event — Mindset, Prep (go/no-go gut-check, scripts, target list), Floor (question bank, capture log), and Follow-Up (the hero) — with a one-page cheat sheet. Built on the principle that a tool only helps if it gets used: value on first open, minimal typing, and the follow-up step made the easiest thing in it.

The space sector is small, it is physical, and it convenes in a handful of rooms each year. The professional who understands *why* those rooms exist, *who* moves through them, and *how* to act inside them with preparation and integrity holds an advantage that compounds over an entire career. Bring your own experience back to these frameworks. Test them in real conditions. Note where they hold and where they break. That is the curriculum.

One final principle runs through every chapter of this guide: the goal is not to work a room for what you can extract from it. It is to be the kind of person a room is better for having held — generous, present, trustworthy, useful to others before yourself. Do that, conference after conference, year after year, and the deals and the doors and the career will follow as fruit. The reputation you build in these rooms is not a means to the work. Over a lifetime in a sector this small, it *is* the work.

© Patrick Connolly 2026