



Young Professional
Committee

So You Want to Host a Networking Event

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Authors:

Kyleah Carruthers (UW-Madison Police Department),

Briane Sposito (York County Department of Emergency Services, 9-1-1 Center)

Gia Goss (Chamblee Police Department, 9-1-1 Center)

Introduction

Networking is a critical part of professional growth in public safety, especially for young professionals who are just entering the 9-1-1 and emergency communications field—or growing within it. Hosting a dedicated networking event gives attendees the chance to connect with peers, mentors, and industry leaders in a structured yet approachable setting. By fostering connections early in their careers, conferences can help young professionals build meaningful professional relationships and stay engaged in the public safety community. Additionally, it also encourages continued participation in future training, aligns for more networking opportunities, and helps grow our mentor pool for the future.

The goal of a young professional networking event isn't just to break the ice—it's to create a space where attendees can share ideas, learn from each other's experiences, and form lasting professional connections. For a networking event to be successful and captivating, it is important to focus on timing and accessibility, the incorporation of interactive activities, and post-event engagement which ensures the benefits of the event extend far beyond a single conference.

Timing and Accessibility

Conferences can be a lot for someone to manage, specifically for young professionals who are trying to gain an understanding of the field they're in. For some, working in public safety could be the starting point of their careers while for others, they want to build connections to help their agency and themselves. For young professionals to succeed in this field, it's important to address timing and accessibility as a key factor when planning a networking event.

Timing and accessibility go hand in hand for any conference. For young professionals, timing and accessibility allows for more flexibility and opportunity. Timing is important because it allocates space for young professionals to fully take in the experience of learning and making connections. This can be done by choosing optimal start times for scheduled events or activities, and being conscious of where events will be held. Accessibility can allow attendees to feel more comfortable

and familiar with the event space, yet it also allows for professionals to feel more included to attend events based on their interests or what their agency may require.

It is important to be aware of other events happening during your chosen timeframe, as competing sessions or mixers can affect attendance and the overall impact of your event. Planning with both timing and accessibility in mind ensures your networking event is easy to reach, well-attended, and effective for building connections.

Interactive Networking Activities

Interactive networking activities are a great way to start any conference. These activities allow participants to break the ice and interact with other attendees, which is important since getting to know one's peers can serve as a foundation in one's professional career. This is especially important, since the goal of the networking event is to have long lasting connections in the public safety industry. Some activities can include interactions through speaking sessions, mixer events, and table tents which can help attendees get outside their comfort zone for their own personal growth. Other ideas, listed below, include:

1. **Information Tabs on Name Tags**

Multiple conferences have utilized name tag ribbons as a way to promote conversation. At Wisconsin Public Safety Communications (WIPSCOM) conferences, which is a partnership between NENA and APCO for Wisconsin telecommunicators, they display multiple different ribbons for attendees to adhere to their conference name tags. This lets other attendees get to know one or two things about each other before they even begin talking!

Options for the ribbons for your conference could include:

- First Time Attendee
- Communications Training Officer
- Speaker
- Vendor

Feel free to have fun with the options and even include:

- Here for the coffee
- I love dogs
- I <3 9-1-1

2. **Scavenger Hunt**

Providing a scavenger hunt at a conference can serve two purposes. First, it promotes interaction among attendees that can evolve into organic interaction as the conference progresses. As human beings, we naturally gravitate toward familiar faces as the week progresses! Second, the purpose is to provide free promotion for your event. You can

encourage this promotion by requesting individuals take photos/selfies to post on their or their agency's social media and tagging the host/event. Additionally, you can consider taking this a step further by providing a selfie station for attendees to accomplish this task! This can help get the word out about your event(s) that young professional telecommunicators can attend in the future.

3. **Interactive Crafts**

Interactive crafts serve as a way to engage participation in an enjoyable way and can be done in two different approaches.

The first approach focuses on offering tables where participants can make generic crafts. An example includes creating your own badge reel by providing the badge reel itself, beads, etc. so attendees can go back to work with a fun souvenir. This provides a little extra fun that attendees can take back to their communications center, yet also allows attendees to feel more comfortable to speak with people at their table.

The second approach would be to offer a more “team-building” approach. At UW-Madison Police Department, during in-house training for telecommunicators, there is usually some sort of “craft” that occurs. This agency has done crafts such as:

- **Portraits.** One person will sit in the middle of the room while everyone else is seated at a table. On each table, telecommunicators will have a piece of paper and markers where they must draw the person in the middle of the room before passing along to the next person at their table. The exciting part, all participants have only 15-20 seconds to draw! This activity promotes having fun and hopefully relieving some of the awkward tension that can be present at conferences where attendees don't know each other.
- **Spaghetti Towers.** Split off into groups of 5 people. Each group is given a handful of dried spaghetti noodles, a few inches of masking tape, and a regular sized marshmallow. Groups can be given about 5 minutes to assemble the tallest tower they can with these materials. The tallest tower wins a prize! This activity promotes interaction and team building among telecommunicators.

Whatever networking activities you choose to provide during a conference, whether you're hosting or not, it is important to make them interactive. You can always maintain a professional environment while promoting attendees to feel more comfortable by providing fun activities for them to participate in.

Extending Connections beyond the Event

Building connections during a conference is valuable—but ensuring those connections continue to grow after the conference ends is what creates an impactful experience. Additionally, it sets each conference apart from the next. Extending networking opportunities beyond the final sessions helps 9-1-1 professionals stay engaged, share ideas, continue the professional development

started at the conference, and stay excited to register again the following year. Below are some ways to help attendees maintain those meaningful connections once they return to their PSAPs.

1. Post-Conference Social Media Groups

Creating a private or shareable Facebook group, LinkedIn community, Instagram group chat, or other online spaces, exclusively for conference attendees, can help extend conversations long after the event is over. These spaces allow participants to share resources, ask questions, and engage with peers they may not have otherwise stayed in touch with. Consider prompting engagement by posting weekly discussion threads or rotating “Ask Me Anything” sessions with presenters, vendors, training officers, and more.

2. Email Connection Lists or Digital Directories

Most conferences offer optional attendee directories, allowing participants to opt in to share their professional contact information. A simple digital list—names, job titles, agencies, and email addresses—can help fuel future collaborations or mentoring relationships. This is especially beneficial for newer 9-1-1 professionals—whether new to the industry, new to their PSAP or region, or newly promoted—who may not have expansive professional networks yet.

3. Follow-Up Challenges

Keep the post-conference excitement going by hosting a 30-day post-conference challenge. This could be a wellness challenge, leadership habit challenge, or continuing education challenge. Encourage attendees to check in on social media (via your established groups), share progress, or partner with someone they met during the event. These challenges promote ongoing interaction and help bridge the gap until your next conference.

4. Quarterly Virtual Meet-Ups

Not every connection has to happen in person. Offering quarterly virtual meet-ups gives attendees the chance to reconnect, talk about new industry trends, and share experiences from their communications centers—all from the comfort of their homes or PSAPs. These can be informal “coffee chats” or more structured sessions led by a guest speaker.

5. Shared Resource Hubs

Consider creating a Google Drive, shared folder, or learning hub where attendees can access conference materials, presentation downloads, and shared tools. When participants return to this hub to grab resources, they may also reconnect with others by asking follow-up questions or sharing new templates or ideas.

6. Mentorship Pairings

Because conferences draw a balance of seasoned telecommunicators and new professionals, mentorship programs can extend the learning environment far beyond the event. Offer optional sign-ups during registration and pair people based on interests, roles,

or goals. These relationships often evolve into long-term professional partnerships that benefit both parties.

Encouraging continued engagement after your event helps transform a conference from a one-time learning opportunity into a lasting professional community. By offering structured ways to stay connected, you ensure that attendees carry the collaboration, support, and inspiration into their careers in public safety—and hopefully into the following conference year.

Conclusion

Hosting a young professionals networking event provides that opportunity since it allows participants to expand their knowledge and gain a better understanding of how they might be better able to assist their agencies. When hosting any networking event, it's imperative to remember that timing and accessibility provide young professionals the opportunity the flexibility to be more involved, however, it is interactive activities that may keep professionals engaged and wanting to return. Additionally, networking provides opportunities for fostering life-long relationships and those relationships in turn can make for better professionals in the 9-1-1 and emergency communications field. We want the best for the future of public safety, and to do that, let's start with hosting a networking event and see the impact it can have.

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