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HEROES AND FRIENDS

By Rob Burdess, ISPA Immediate Past President



The 82nd Annual [Iowa State Police Association \(ISPA\) Conference](#) in Ames is quickly approaching, as is the end of my tenure on the ISPA Board of Directors. It's a bittersweet time as I have been involved in a lot of great things that have improved law enforcement in Iowa, but it's time to pass the torch and let others move us forward. As I reflect on my experience on the ISPA Board, I find that one of the most important aspects was the opportunity to grow my professional network. This has paid off in a number of ways throughout my tenure on the board and as a police officer, and the relationships that were built will last a lifetime.

As an ISPA Board Member, it's important to have connections at all levels of government, with other Iowa and nationwide public safety associations, law enforcement agencies, businesses, and other nonprofits and organizations that generally have the same values and mission to forward their respective profession. Building these relationships over time has allowed the ISPA Board to influence lawmakers, improve law enforcement training and professionalism and develop a higher level of member benefits. It's much easier to accomplish these tasks when you have established yourself as a competent professional and have shown that you are involved with a professional organization working to benefit a good cause. Building a professional reputation does not happen overnight, but once established, you can reap the benefits for years to come.

If you have ever considered building your professional network, I would encourage you to attend ISPA Conference in Ames October 13–15, and begin your journey. Conferences, training courses and trade shows offer prime opportunities for networking, but you have to be intentional in the way you go about making contacts. To maximize your opportunities, I recommend the following tips for success:

Develop a strategy

Decide what you are trying to accomplish. You may be looking at moving to a different department or a new position within your own department, running for the ISPA Board, searching for the best new law enforcement products, looking for training tips or just trying to figure out how other departments accomplish the same tasks as you do at your own department. The answers you are searching for are all within your grasp, but approaching the subject haphazardly will not get you the results you want. The conference is full of professionals ranging from rookies to 40+ year retirees and veterans. If it has been done, the attendees of the conference have probably been there and done that.

Meet new friends

Cops have a tendency to gravitate toward the people they know. As brave as we are on the streets, we are often hesitant to strike up conversations with “strangers.” Why that is, I will never know. Well, it’s time to get over it. We all do the same job and have similar personality traits. You can be from the largest or smallest department, be the chief or rookie, or be from Venus or Mars, and you will still find something in common simply because you are cut from the same cloth. The oath we took and the lifestyle we chose is a lifetime bond. Sit beside different people at the conference, during lunch, at breaks, etc. Make it your mission to meet at least five new people at each conference.

Be heard

I’ve always been a fairly quiet person, but when I need to be heard, I find the audience that’s going to give me the most bang for my buck. What does that mean? Do your research and find out who the movers and shakers are within the industry. Focus on those who you may be able to influence to further your agenda. If you are looking to move to another department, you want to focus on that department’s current members. If you are considering a run for the ISPA Board, focus on current board members, past presidents and representatives from other locals. Talking to the vendors generally won’t help you get on the board or land you a new job, but you may get a free keychain.

Be social

This may be the easiest of all. Just being social and generating contacts with other departments will eventually pay off. Maybe you have a case that somehow escaped your jurisdiction and filtered into another. Working cases that go beyond your city’s border is made much easier by knowing officers from other departments. Being social is easy. Just talk to as many people as you can without having a specific agenda. Your goal is to introduce yourself, shoot the breeze and have fun. This is often made easier in the hospitality room. I may have made more friends in this setting than any of the others combined. Being relaxed and in a natural setting puts us at ease and allows our social juices to flow. I encourage you to maximize this time and make some contacts.

If you develop a great contact at the conference be sure to follow up with a phone call, email or personal meeting. At least acknowledge the other person when you see them at the next conference or training course you attend. Regardless of the depth of your initial meeting, these relationships will prove to be priceless down the road. I have made law enforcement friends throughout the world, and I don’t regret a single contact. I’ve never met a more brave and dedicated group of professionals, and I rest easy knowing that wherever I go in this world, I will always be under the vigilant eye of my heroes and friends. Stay safe and I hope to see you at the ISPA Conference in October.