

Wildflower, Wallflower, Or Rose About To Bloom - How Will You Be Remembered After The Conference?

by Kellie Finley

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Anyone that's ever been to a conference knows you meet a wide variety of people there. Remember that wildflower in the laser red dress – always a bit too loud, a bit too opinionated, a bit too, well, wild? Remember how you kept wondering how she could wear that dress and not worry about her chest falling out for all to see? Hard to forget her, isn't it? And what about that quiet little wallflower in the brown suit? Think hard. She was the one that always seemed alone, never said anything, looked a bit lost or maybe sad. The one that had you wondering why she had spent all that money to attend when she was clearly miserable. Now, think one more time, about that one individual that left you in awe and you wished you could be more like. Remember her? The one that was always smiling, seemed to know almost everyone there, always had something pleasant to say. Remember seeing her with different folks almost everyday? Can't remember exactly what she wore – it was different each day – but you do remember she struck you as very stylish and attractive. You thought she was one of the people in life that everything comes easily for, didn't you? Remember wondering if she was someone high up the ladder in publishing, because she was just too comfortable with everything – just too pulled together? She was like a rose about to bloom – almost perfect in its promise of what's to come.

With the annual RWA conference approaching, many of you are thinking about what to pack, what to pitch, and are starting to worry about what impression you will make. After years attending conferences – as hostess, as attendee, as speaker, as observer – I can tell you with 100% certainty, you can decide what image you want to project and make it happen. Right now, before you even start to pack your bag, you can learn to be that woman of grace, charm, and style; the rose that awed you (and probably everyone else). I'm going to help you.

1. This is a business trip. You need to acknowledge that this is a business trip, and that it's not "business as usual." You're not going on vacation; you're not meeting your college roommate at a spa. This is a business trip. This is going to be work. And not the work you're used to. You aren't a professional conference diva (or you wouldn't be reading this), you're a writer. You're used to working long hours alone. You're going to have to stay focused with so many people and so many different activities going on all around you. Write that on the back of one of your business cards and tape it to the bathroom mirror as soon as you get to the hotel. *This is a business trip.*
2. Have specific priorities. Know why you're there. There is never enough time to do everything you want to do once you actually arrive at the conference. Appointments, networking, workshops, book signings, photo opportunities – make a list right now, and prioritize it, of why you are going and what you want to get done. Got the list? How long is it? Now, cut it down to three – yes, *three* – "got to do" things. Can't do it? Yes, you can. Think IRS or Revenue Canada for a minute. What are the top three reasons you could give them explaining why you just had to attend this conference and why these are valid business expenses? (Hint: Death by Chocolate extravaganza probably isn't going to fly with them; it's a perk of going, not a "make or break" career move.) Ok, now, got your list of three? Don't throw away all the other things you want to do, just wait until you actually *get* to the conference to see if you still really want to do them or if something better has caught your attention.
3. Never let them see you sweat. Don't let nervous actions get you in trouble. Too much nervous nibbling or drinking at the conference can trigger pressures you don't need. Eating or drinking too much of anything can give you stomach troubles, but especially too much of things you're not used to – salty, rich, heavy, sweet, fried, spicy, alcoholic – can really shake up your system. You'll be at risk of being grouchy during the day from stomach aches, gas, headaches, or being in the bathroom from too much fluid. And worse, you won't sleep well

that night, and will be over tired and in really bad shape the next day. Have a plan for releasing the tension. Find an exercise bike. Take a walk. Meditate for five minutes in a quiet place. *Figure out what works for you, and then plan on how to make it happen.*

An extra warning about alcohol. Don't let a case of nerves and your desire to fit in get you in over your head. You may think that lady in the too tight red dress should be shot for appearing in public dressed like that but do you really need to tell her (or five of her friends)? How well will you handle it the next day when you're ready to give your pitch to that elusive acquiring editor and you find out she was the lady in red?

4. Comfort counts. Comfort is mandatory. Not sloppy sweat suit or pajamas comfort, but not "tugging at every piece of clothing you have on" crazy either. Not beachside barefoot comfort, but not "can't walk in those six inch heel shoes" crazy. Not no make-up, haven't combed your hair in days comfort, but not "got a new hairstyle that won't work and been up all night crying" crazy. *Looking* your professional best will help you *feel* your professional best. And I will be the first to say there is nothing wrong with a new dress or pants suit (or a whole wardrobe if you can swing it). But, don't do all of this twenty minutes before the conference starts. Don't try to be someone you're not. If you are a sweat suits person at home, and you secretly long to be the siren in red at the conference – *you just know that's who's inside you trying to get out* – buy the outfit weeks in advance and *practice* wearing it around home. If you spend the entire evening with your hands up around your throat fiddling with a necklace so your décolleté doesn't show, you're just not going to put your best self forward. Better that quiet navy and burgundy pant suit you've been eyeing. The one that's sharp, professional, and – most importantly – you. And if your normal style is that sizzling red dress with six inch heels, for goodness sakes, don't buy a high collar, gray business suit – you'll spend the day feeling like you're choking. *Go with what works for you.*
5. Be prepared. The Girl Scouts know what they're talking about – *be prepared*. You're going to be meeting people you don't know and you're going to be nervous. They're probably going to be nervous too. And there is nothing more painful than two (or more) nervous people just standing (or sitting) there staring at each other. So, you need to know at least one, preferably three clean jokes. (If you write romantica, I'd suggest knowing one sexy joke, too.) Don't know any clean jokes? Let me help. Have you heard the one about Forrest Gump and St. Peter? I'll include it at the end of this article for you. Maybe jokes aren't your thing (still know at least one, trust me), so you also need to know at least one, preferably three safe stand by lines or conversation starters. (Don't get confused, I am not talking bar room pick up lines.) Think of the first time you saw your sister's baby in the hospital. She thought he was a gift from the angels and you thought he looked like ET only with a nasty howl added. What did you do? Did you lie and say he was beautiful? Don't do that – lies are like a runaway snowball – they keep growing. Next time, use my stand by line, "Oh, wow, whose eyes does the baby have?" She's happy and starts babbling about junior, and you didn't have to lie about anything. Now, do you get it? Try this, "what do you write?" Wait for the answer. Respond with something like this, "Oh, wow. What first intrigued you to write that?" And don't forget to listen to the response. You might be surprised to find out you actually do have a few other things in common to talk to this person about. *Be prepared.*
6. Stick together. Just like the teacher told you when you were a child on a school fieldtrip – *have a buddy*. Make arrangements to meet up with someone you know, and can let your guard down with. Someone that you will not only want to share your successes with, but someone that you're comfortable letting out your fears and failures to. This person will help keep you sane. She will remind you of your strengths, console you through your challenges, and celebrate with you over your successes. She'll bring you "good" chocolate, even when you pretend to be dieting (thanks, Julie!). *Have – and be – a buddy.*
7. Have fun. Yes, always keep in mind that this is a business trip. But also remember that this is a career *that you love*. While this isn't a spa vacation, it isn't a prison sentence either. It won't last forever. Next week you can hide behind your computer screen again. *Have fun; enjoy the experience.*

Now, about that joke. . .

Forrest Gump is at the gates of heaven and St. Peter indicates that he must answer three questions before he can enter. Forrest says he'll try his best. The first question is, "How many seconds are there in a year?"

After pondering this for a long while, Forrest answers, "Twelve."

"Twelve?" St. Peter questions. "How did you come up with twelve, Forrest?"

"Well, I counted," Forrest explained. "The second of January, the second of February, the . . ."

"Ok, Forrest," St. Peter sighed. "I can understand how you got that answer. The next question is, what two days of the week start with the letter 't'?"

Forrest frowned for a minute, then nodded as he came to the answer. "Today and tomorrow."

Again, St. Peter sighed. "Alright, Forrest, I can see how you might think that. I'm going to ask you the last question. What is God's first name?"

Forrest's face brightened instantly. "I know this one. God's first name is Andy."

St. Peter was very puzzled. "Forrest, why do you think God's first name is Andy?"

Forrest smiled. "Because my mama used to sing about him all the time."

"Sing?" St. Peter questioned.

"Yup. . . .Andy walked with me, Andy talked to me. . . ." Forrest solemnly sung.

St. Peter swung the gates of heaven open and said, "Run, Forrest. Run."

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