

# Making the Rounds

*Good planning, a skillful ground game, and smart follow up will ensure a valuable roundtable experience.*

By Mark Wright

With so many opportunities for learning and networking at SSA's Fall Conference & Trade Show, getting the greatest bang-for-the-buck requires a good road map. Roundtable discussions can be especially challenging due to their open-ended, unstructured format.

Aimlessly wandering in to a roundtable session just because you're not sure where else to go at that moment can leave you—and your fellow participants—very dissatisfied. Giving and receiving in these discussions are equally important. You can make roundtable sessions a meaningful and memorable part of your SSA conference experience by following three simple steps: prepare, participate and follow up.

First, let's look at the two types of roundtables offered this year.

**Educational:** Scheduled for 3:15–4:30 p.m. on Wednesday, September 9, these discussions are meant to cover a wide variety of self storage topics—nearly 30 this year—and are facilitated by knowledgeable leaders. A bell will ring at regular intervals, signaling an opportunity to hop to another topic at a different table.

**Exhibitor-sponsored:** Set for 8:30–9:45 a.m. on Thursday, September 10, these discussions are being held as a result of feedback from past SSA conferences where attendees expressed a desire for additional time with exhibitors. SSA will provide an advance list of exhibitor tables.

## Step 1: Preparation

How you prepare depends to some extent on whether you will be attending the conference solo or as one of several colleagues from the same company.

If you will be there with a company team, meet in advance and identify the topics you collectively want to be sure get discussed in the roundtable—both for your firm as well as for each of you as storage pros. Divvy up the topics and decide who will represent your firm at each table. Agree on a note-taking protocol so team members can capture helpful information to share with one another later.

An individual can obviously only be in one place at a time, so you have two choices if you find yourself an army of one: prioritize or recruit allies. Spend some quality time prior to the show thinking about what you want out of

the roundtables. Make a list of questions you'd like to get answered or problems for which you want advice. If your list is too long to cover by yourself, either focus on the top two to three issues you want addressed, or consider building your own team to cover all the bases; contact a few fellow storage pros and merge your lists into a shared game plan.

## Step 2: Participation

The roundtables are meant to be educational, so stick to professional development issues rather than inserting mini-commercials for your company.

Know what's OK and not OK to reveal about yourself or your company (no talk of pricing, for example—an anti-trust no-no).

Remain civil. Refrain from arguing or passing judgment. Don't dominate the discussion; let everyone weigh-in fairly.

Be generous in sharing your knowledge and experience.

If you plan to live tweet or post photos and comments to social media during discussions, be sure to get permission upfront from fellow participants.

And, of course, respect the role and authority of each roundtable's facilitator.

## Step 3: Smart Follow-up

Think about what you will do following the roundtable—before it ever starts.

Bombarding a group or individual subject matter expert with questions during a session will earn you more frowns than friends, so politely get a business card and email people afterward if you have specific follow-up questions. Likewise, get a business card from leaders of those discussions you couldn't attend.

Use social media, as appropriate, to reach out afterward or to follow the postings and advice of participants and leaders—but be selective, strategic and respectful.

Every roundtable is a two-way, give-and-take opportunity. By making and following a plan that suits your interests, you'll continue to benefit from these discussions long after the conference. ♦