Staying Safe at Conventions
Lou Figueroa

Conventions are a great place to learn and relax. For many of us, it’s a chance to get away from routines, often in unfamiliar towns. We are able to let our hair down but shouldn’t let our guard down.

The other day I was in a city and noticed a well-dressed man stumbling and disoriented late at night. He could have been either sick or drunk. After observing him get up from the sidewalk I noticed him stagger towards four lanes of traffic.

His attire made him look like a conventioneer. I approached as he was headed towards the cars and offered a stick of gum so as not to startle him. I asked if he was OK and he said, “I’m lost, drunk and I don’t know which hotel I’m staying in.” I offered to help and escorted him back to his hotel.

Unfamiliar Surroundings

A similar situation happened to me. I was at a social event and my unguarded drink was drugged-tampered. I left the bar and wandered nearly two miles in the dark, having no idea of my surroundings. No body stopped to help or ask if I was OK. Eventually I walked into the train yard and was run over – losing both my legs.

Here are eight tips to keep convention attendees stay safe.

- **Study the Area** – Know the safest route before you go (driving or walking) and identify areas you don’t want to encounter. If unfamiliar with the area ask the hotel front desk, bell staff or valet.

- **Remove Convention IDs** – Remove your name badge and ribbons. Similarly, leave the convention totes back in the room. These are signs you are from out of town and might be an easy target.

- **Scan the Environment** – Look for well-lit streets and areas you feel safe. Select routes that are the shortest between your destination and hotel or conference center. Be leery of people who are overly friendly in wanting to be of help or offering you a deal.
• **Buddy System** – Walk with friends. If you’re in a social setting, let them know you want a buddy --- don’t let them assume you left on your own and should not worry about you. In my case, I wandered for over an hour and my friends assumed I’d simply left and went home. Periodically check on each other and agree on departure times.

• **Guard Your Drink** – If you leave your drink on the table or bar unguarded even a few minutes, say the time it takes to hit the dance floor or visit the bathroom, throw it away. There are people who look for opportunities to spike anybody’s drink just for kicks.

• **Backup Identification** – Be careful leaving valuables, purses and especially IDs in meeting and hotel rooms. Travel with a second official government issued ID such as a passport stored in a separate location. At a minimum, make a copy of your driver’s license so if it were lost officials could use the information to check databases.

• **Escape Routes** – Whether in the meeting room or guestroom, notice the nearest exits. In an emergency you want to be the first out the door heading for the exit. Remember an emergency could occur at the most inopportune time and in the dark. Consider leaving your shoes and clothing next to the bed if you need to run out the door. It can’t hurt to grab the blanket and pillow since you don’t know how long you may be forced to stay outside in an emergency. Keep the room key accessible.

• **Hotel Door** – Don’t let anybody in the room without knowing they are expected and wearing a uniform or badge. Think twice about hanging a breakfast order on the exterior door knob that identifies your name and room number for a stranger to pick up. In a fire emergency, be sure to check the door for heat and smoke before exiting.

I travel to conventions every week and see the risks that meeting registrants take. I don’t want what happened to me in a train yard to occur to anybody else. Be safe.

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About the Author: Lou Figueroa is an inspirational speaker promoting quality of life, safety and overcoming crisis. He can be contacted at lou@inspiredbalance.org.