

# Tips For The Business Traveler

By Ramona Creel

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Most people view business travel to be a stressful and time-consuming process. Preparation for any trip takes time out of your schedule. But imagine if you had to pack and unpack your suitcase several times a month! Business travel also opens the door for a unique set of concerns. If you forget something (a bathing suit, a toothbrush) on a personal vacation, you can usually replace it while on your trip. But if a business traveler forgets a presentation or an important report, it could have much more serious consequences. Business travelers also feel the constant pressure to be "at work" while they are away. They type away at their laptops at the airport, draft letters on the plane, and make cell phone calls in the taxi. Consequently, many business travelers never have (or take) the time to relax during their trips, and come back more stressed and worn out than they were before they left.

But planning and preparation can cut down on some of these concerns. Having a set of PROCEDURES that you follow each time you travel will alleviate some of your anxiety and reduce the likelihood of an emergency occurring.

## PACKING FOR A BUSINESS TRIP

Problems such as running out of legal paper or misplacing an important phone number are stressful enough within the confines of your office. Without the safety and comfort of "home," feelings of unpreparedness and vulnerability are multiplied. But you can reduce the chances of forgetting something important if you SYSTEMATIZE your trip preparation.

If you often have to travel on short notice, keep a pre-packed overnight bag ready at all times -- including travel-sized toiletries, duplicates of important personal items (travel alarm, night light), and sleepwear. Then, when duty calls, all you have to do is pack your clothes just before you leave. And it is particularly important in business situations to simplify your travel wardrobe -- bring items that you can mix and match, that don't wrinkle, and that don't require special care. The last thing that you want to worry about as you prepare for an important meeting is hauling a lot of heavy luggage around. Of course you want to dress appropriately for the occasion, but you can avoid over-packing by thinking through your wardrobe ahead of time.

You can also save a lot of time by pre-packing a travel briefcase. Keep this traveling office well stocked with office supplies -- pens, stapler, notepads, paperclips, a calculator -- whatever you tend to need on the road. Also create a travel folder for collecting those papers and materials (presentation overheads, reference items, unfinished work, travel information, etc.) you will need to take with you. Either fill your folder as you plan your trip, or keep a list clipped to the front of the

folder. Then, make a note in your calendar to double-check your list and finish filling your folder the day before you leave. And once you have settled on an itinerary, record all of your pertinent travel information -- agenda, flight information, hotel reservation -- on one sheet that you keep close at hand throughout your trip. There is nothing more frustrating than shuffling through a stack of papers trying to find your hotel's address with an impatient cab driver waiting!

## TRAVELING FOR CONVENIENCE

The business traveler's main goal is to get to his or her destination with as few problems and delays as possible (well, I guess that's a major concern for every traveler!) Start by making all of your arrangements through a travel agent. This will save you time, worry, and possibly money, as many travel agents are privy to deals that the general public cannot access. When you are booking your flight, have the travel agent go ahead and request your seat assignment along with your reservation. Ask to be seated as close to the front of the plane as possible, so you can be one of the first off of the aircraft. Also, aim for the earliest flight possible to give you plenty of "buffer" in case of delays.

You can take a lot of the guesswork out of your trip by becoming familiar and loyal to a chain of hotels that offer extra services for the business traveler. What are you always needing while on the road -- a copy machine? Fax? Modem? Courier service? Then look for accommodations that provide these services directly at the hotel. Also keep an eye out for those free services that make mornings easier -- continental breakfasts, the coffee machine in your room (if you are a caffeine junkie like my husband), an iron in your closet, and a newspaper by your door. These small touches will save you a lot of time, help you feel more at home, and get you going quicker in the mornings.

## THEY CAN SURVIVE WITHOUT YOU!

Some people have the mistaken impression that, if they leave the office for even one day, the entire operation will fall apart without them. Although some matters which come up will need your personal attention, very few will require your IMMEDIATE personal attention. By preparing your staff to deal with emergencies before you leave, you will reduce the number of times you must be interrupted while on your trip.

Take care of as many matters as you can before leaving town. Return phone calls, respond briefly to any outstanding letters, and inform important clients and colleagues of the dates that you will be unavailable. The fewer loose ends you leave, the fewer fires you should have to put out while you are gone. But if your staff should need to contact you, make it easy for them to reach you. Prepare 4 copies of a written itinerary before leaving -- for you, your secretary, your spouse, and the front desk at the hotel where you will be staying. Your staff will be less likely to panic if they have a clear idea of where you will be and what you will be doing each day that you are gone.

The most important step you can take is instructing your staff on how to handle situations while you are gone. Clearly define what issues warrant interrupting your trip and tell your staff how to take care of any other matters that pop up. Have your voice mail message direct callers to the appropriate party and assign urgent matters to a colleague. The goal should be to present a seamless service to your clientele. Customers don't want to hear that a problem can not be resolved because "so-and-so" is out of town. Your duty is to TRAIN your staff to head off problems that occur during your absence.

## STAYING ORGANIZED ON THE ROAD

Once you have embarked on your business trip, you may find that you have a hard time staying on top of it all -- your schedule, luggage, paperwork, expenses. There are, however some tricks that will help you keep track of your belongings and prevent personal loss. If at all possible, only bring what

you can carry onto the plane. Checking your bags wastes time and invites lost luggage. Pack two small carryon bags rather than checking a bag -- one for your work items and one for your clothes. If you do have to check a bag, check the personal items and hold onto your business materials. If you had to choose between losing your clothes and losing your presentation materials, which would be the more tragic loss?

Keeping track of your expenses can seem like a real chore -- but it's easy if you do your record-keeping as you go. Use separate credit cards for business and personal purchases, and keep all of your receipts in one place. Reserve a zippered pocket in your planner or a manila folder for all business-related receipts. Then, mark your expense form as you go along -- recording the item purchased, the date, and the amount -- and retype it when you return from your trip. You'll find this much easier than trying to remember where and when you paid \$5 for parking -- especially on long trips.

And what do you do with the myriad of paperwork business trips seem to inspire? You may have brought some of this paper with you, but the vast majority materializes once you have attended that first meeting (and heaven help you if you are attending a lengthy conference or trade show!) Airline tickets, agendas, and presentation materials are all susceptible to being misplaced when you are in a strange environment -- so try to keep all of your important paperwork in one place in your hotel room. And be sure to put out a sign that says "Don't Throw Away" if you plan to leave papers sitting out while you are gone (those housekeepers can be a bit too efficient!) Take a few moments to review the materials you have received at the end of each day. Categorize the information in a way that makes sense to you, discard what is unneeded, and make notes while the ideas are fresh in your mind. And keep a notepad nearby so you can make a running "to-do" list of items that require your attention when you return.

## SCHEDULING YOUR DAYS

Most people maintain a hectic schedule during business trips, running from one activity to another. Delays are unavoidable in life, particularly in travel. Unfortunately, very few people know how to deal with unscheduled gaps in their schedule. Rather than making good use of the time, they view the delay as a stressful event. So prepare for delays. Start by building in a CUSHION on either side of your appointments. Don't just leave enough time in your itinerary to travel from point A to point B -- assume that 43 different people are going to slow you down and you will have to make a detour to point C along the way! Also have a contingency plan in case an activity is postponed or cancelled -- bring work or reading material with you to fill the time.

And let's look at this scenario -- you've been in meetings all day from morning 'til afternoon. What do you do with your FREE TIME in the evening? More work? If you were at home, would you come home from a long day and immediately say, "Gee, I really should get more work done"? Well, some people do, but that's a completely different issue! Don't feel guilty about building room into your schedule for fun stuff -- sightseeing or going to a movie or having a relaxing non-business dinner. You are allowed some personal time on your trip, too!

## WHEN YOU RETURN

No matter how well you prepare for a trip, how well you train your staff to head off emergencies, your return home will probably be punctuated by a barrage of telephone messages, a pile of unanswered e-mails, and a stack of unopened mail -- welcome to the information age! And this doesn't even include the work that you've brought back with you from your trip. Where do you start?

Sometimes just digging in will help you get a handle on all that needs to be done. Go through your mail, voice messages, and e-mail, making note of any issues that require your attention. Add these

"to-do's" to the list you've been developing while on your trip -- then put your list in order of priority, with the most urgent items at the top. Now that you have evaluated each item and developed a plan of action, you can make the most efficient use of your work time -- starting at the top of the list and work your way down.

Also, take a few moments to put everything away when you return, both at home and at work. Nothing makes a business trip seem so unfinished as a pile of clothes waiting to be hung up or a stack of papers that you haven't taken the time to sort through. Go through the materials you have gathered on your travels and divide them into three piles -- "to delegate," "action items," and "to file." If an item needs to be passed on to someone else, do it ASAP rather than letting it clutter up your desk -- and the same is true with reference items that simply need to be filed away. Once you have cleared up these two stacks, the rest seems a lot less overwhelming.

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