

Natural Networking

“Only Connect”.– E.M. Forster

Networking. Everybody’s doing it: Or should be.

Cultivating and maintaining a wide network of personal and professional contacts is a required skill for anyone active in the business world and community environment, and often the foundation for securing new clients, new business, or new careers. In fact, networking’s become such a ‘necessary evil’ that many people are offended by the very word. However, when done properly, networking, or simply meeting people, can be fun, and quite productive in terms of informational exchange as well as opportunity.

The key is to offer yourself - as a resource, a referral base, or simply ally and friend, rather than going in looking to gain something at the outset. This perspective will change the dynamics in terms of how you approach others, and how you present yourself.

But where and how does one begin? The answer is here and now.

Establish Presence

Considering that every step outside your home may lead to an important encounter, are you prepared, physically and mentally, for those opportunities to arrive? Before you “go public”, even on weekends and off-hours, give some thought to your wardrobe, accessories, and overall grooming, keeping in mind that casual does not equal unkempt.

Get in the habit of carrying business cards at all times, and always be ready with a smile, a firm and energetic handshake, and light conversation topics. Be quick to extend your hand and introduce yourself.

For more formal or organized business or professional events also:

- Research the audience or participants to connect through conversation.
- Use your time to talk to people, rather than eat or drink. Eat beforehand.
- Develop a brief and clever (20 seconds maximum) self-introduction narrative.
- Pronounce your name clearly, and make sure you hear the other person’s as well. If you are unsure of their name or pronunciation, ask them to repeat it right away.
- If you are holding a drink, keep it in your left hand, so you can shake hands easily.
- Speak with enthusiasm; say only positive, upbeat things about yourself and the event.
- Ask open-ended questions, and do more listening than talking.
- Keep your full focus on your conversation partner until you have said goodbye.

Navigating an Event

Most of us are a little intimidated, if not plain terrified, to meet large groups of new people. But the most counter-productive approach to attending an event is to bring a friend or colleague as a 'bodyguard', to protect you from going it alone.

Meeting new friends and colleagues is the whole point of networking, and having a buddy beside you will prevent others from approaching you (aren't you reluctant to 'interrupt' a duo in conversation?) and distract you from focusing on the room. By all means, attend with a friend - then separate during the event.

Instead, to minimize anxiety and maximize connections:

- Arrive early. On the dot or a little before. The few people already in attendance will focus fully on you, and your comfort level will raise before the room is crowded.
- Leave behind (or check) big bags and briefcases. You need to be able to mingle easily.
- Feel free to join groups of more than two people. How do you think the rest got there? Just extend your hand and introduce yourself when there is a break in conversation (this approach is not only appropriate at events, but expected).
- Don't monopolize, even if you are charming or an expert. Schedule time to continue the conversation elsewhere.
- Always ask for business cards if you care to, but do not offer yours unless asked.
- Accept business cards with care: Look at them, read them, and store them gracefully in a purse, or card case rather than jamming them into a pocket. Cards are an extension of identity, and should be treated accordingly.
- If you would like to exit from a conversation, simply thank the person for the chat and the chance to meet, shake hands warmly, and move on. Skip the excuses about going to the bar or bathroom.

Following Up

This is often the area where even the most well-intentioned falter, and that is in keeping up the connection. New acquaintances are like seedlings: They won't grow if left alone.

If you are sincere about developing a new personal or business relationship, you need to let the other party know. It is a losing proposition when someone chats you up, takes your card, walks away...and disappears forever. He or she is no longer meaningful in any way.

So, if you are serious about maintaining contact, make sure to:

- Email them right away to express your pleasure with the introduction.
- Thank them promptly if they offered or delivered something helpful.
- If you offered resources or referral, do so immediately.
- Let contacts know the outcomes of their referrals or recommendations.

- If a subsequent meeting or lunch was mentioned, schedule it now.
- Forward relevant links or articles, or book titles - but not on a group list until you know your new contact better.
- Invite him or her to a professional or public event.
- Send congratulations or greeting for promotions, press appearances, birthdays or babies.

Vary your approaches between a phone call and email if your first gesture brings no response; take a break of several weeks or months if both are met with silence, and then reconsider at a later date if you have something more to offer.

Learn to accept silence - or rejection - gracefully, but never personally: some people are truly overwhelmed, depressed, or just plain rude. Move on to other matters.

Just make sure that you yourself are consistently helpful, responsive, and generous with your time, attention, and resources, and remember: never underestimate the power of a handwritten note.

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