Attending a Networking Event? Here's How to Make the Most of It

Networking can be intimidating for many people, regardless of their job title and experience. But, the reality is, with enough practice and the right guidance, anyone can be a master networker. Steve Rosen offers some advice on how to get the most out of your next networking event.

How often have you approached someone you didn't know, or been introduced to by someone else, at a networking event? Odds are, if you are like most people, the answer is not recently. The reason networking seems so daunting is because most simply aren't prepared. Being prepared doesn't mean wearing your best outfit and bringing a stack of business cards. Although both important—there's so much more to the networking equation.

It's fair to say networking has dramatically changed with the rapid onset of social media. The likes of LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter all allow virtual strangers to connect even when they've never met face-to-face. However, nothing beats good old fashioned in-person networking events—where those who know how to work a room stand out from the ones who avoid the action and stand on the sidelines.

Why networking matters

How well you network and leverage your connections can make a big difference in your career, but it's especially critical when you're in a transition. Point in case, a survey by The Adler Group found that at least 85 percent of critical jobs were filled through networking. It's not surprising that many companies run referral programs that encourage their employees to help recruit new hires from their own network of friends.

Simply put—if you're not networking on a regular basis, you're missing out on career opportunities. Not sure where to start? Here are some actionable tips to help you master the art of networking.

Start with a great introduction

First impressions really do count when you're networking. Craft an introduction that sparks interest and opens the door to further conversation. Lead with a statement that conveys who you are and why you've come to this event. For example, you might say you're a finance executive interested in learning about how artificial intelligence could transform the way audits are done. You should focus on your value proposition, i.e., the value you, uniquely, can bring to a new employer. A caveat: don't say you're there because you're looking for work.

Be concise and memorable

Keep your introduction concise—30 seconds is a good rule of thumb—and make it memorable by highlighting one major accomplishment or point of differentiation. Use clever or funny references to help people remember your information. For example, you might introduce yourself as John Blonde—like the hair colour.

Own the room and make everyone feel welcome

It's easy to lose confidence when you're faced with a room full of strangers. One of the best ways to counter this feeling is by acting like a host. Treat the people around you as though they were your guests. Welcome them to the event as they walk in and introduce them to other guests. By doing this, you'll make instant connections and establish yourself as a confident presence in the room.

Read body language to approach people strategically

It's often best to approach people when they're by themselves or when they're in a group of three or more. The single person will appreciate your initiative and the group will, in most cases, welcome an additional voice in their discussion. When approaching two people who are standing face-to-face and appear to be deep in discussion, it may be best to wait so you don't interrupt their conversation. If they're standing at an angle to each other and scanning the room as they talk, then they're likely looking for a break in the chat.

Mind your own body language

Be aware of what you're communicating with your posture, poses, and movements. Crossed arms and legs, for example, signal disinterest. As much as possible, leave your arms unfolded during conversation, keep your body "open", and maintain eye contact. And don't forget to smile—it's the best way to make everyone, including yourself, feel at ease.

Be genuinely interested

Effective networking is about exchanging ideas. Yet many people make the mistake of talking too much about themselves and listening only so they can prepare a response. To make the most of a networking event, ask insightful questions and truly pay attention to their answers. This allows you to find common ground and to share relevant and valuable information.

The business of business cards

Always bring business cards that you can hand out while networking. But do so only when it makes sense and after you've had a good conversation. It's also a good idea to ask if you can connect through business-focused social media platforms such as LinkedIn. These are good places to follow up with a quick thank you and perhaps to answer a question you weren't able to answer during the initial conversation. And think about the next step; perhaps a coffee meeting to continue and expand on your conversation?

Know how to exit gracefully

Make sure you keep moving to other people in the room. But try not to abandon your new conversation partner. When possible, bring a third person into the conversation before you excuse yourself. This is how a good host—and master networker—would behave.

Set a reasonable goal

You don't have to come away with ten new best friends. Particularly for introverts, the conversations may be draining. So, give yourself a reasonable goal—two, three, maybe four meaningful connections over the evening—and then give yourself a break when you hit it!

Keep at it

Don't expect immediate results—such as a job lead—from your first networking event. Building a good network usually takes some time. Make a point of staying in touch with your new connections and reach out to people you haven't heard from in a while. Even after you've found a new position, it's a good idea to keep networking. You'll keep your skills sharp and your network of connections constantly growing.

Can you become a master networker?

Effective networking doesn't happen overnight. It requires hours of putting yourself out there and a conscious effort to act and speak in a way that puts you in the best possible light. This can be intimidating for many people, regardless of their job title and experience. But the reality is, with enough practice and the right guidance, anyone can be a master networker.

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