

How to Make the Most of a Networking Event

by Mariette Edwards

Contrary to what many believe, networking events are not about pressing your business card into as many hands as you can. They are, however, great opportunities to learn about what other people are looking for.

As you listen, you will find that what you offer may be exactly what the other person seeks.

A few years ago I was working with a woman who was an ordained minister. She had established a prayer ministry that she wanted to promote at an upcoming ministerial conference.

In preparing for the event, she had created a brochure that outlined her ministry's mission. She planned to pass out as many of these brochures as possible at the conference. When she told me her strategy, I suggested she do something else. I asked her to leave the brochures at home.

Instead, I wanted her to focus on asking each person she met about themselves, their church, their challenges and what they most wanted to accomplish. She was not to talk about what she did unless she was asked.

People were so impressed by her interest in them that they soon asked about what she did. She would then lean into their interest by sharing her vision for what her prayer ministry could accomplish in the world

Many people wanted to know more and she agreed to send them a brochure when she returned home. She was, in fact, so proficient at executing her new strategy that the attendees voted to award her the \$500 stipend the organization granted each year to the most worthy endeavor represented at the conference!

Being interested in other people is very attractive. It is also a lot less stressful than taking a deep breath and saying as much about yourself as you possibly can before the other person's eyes glaze over.

Here's how to make the most of your next networking event:

Decide in advance who you want to meet

Let's say you are attending the event to meet potential employers or find job leads.

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Start by defining your ideal job. Be as specific as possible. Clarity is magnetic! Clarity helps you recognize opportunity and helps others bring opportunity to you.

Your objective then becomes meeting individuals who can move you closer to your ideal job.

When you are in conversation with someone new, ask questions that will help you learn about what that other person is looking for and then match his or her responses against what you are looking for. The more closely the match, the easier it is to lean into the other person's situation with your solution.

Be prepared to tell people what you do in 30 seconds or less

What you do is not your job or position, but the solutions you offer. For example, as a Coach, I show people how to turn their desire into results. What happens because of what you do?

Practice listening

In the movie, "Michael", Andie McDowell's character asks Michael how he knew she wasn't who she said she was. He leans toward her and whispers, "I pay attention"!

Listening is a verb. Practice listening to what the other person is saying and not saying. Listen for opportunity for both of you.

Wear something you feel great in and that communicates your brand

Here's someone who has created a simple but powerful way to communicate who she is and what she does. Her name is Olive and she is a professional photographer. At networking events, she wears olive colored clothing and a pin in the shape of a camera.

Olive has made it easy to be remembered. What could make meeting you memorable?

Create a tag line for your name badge that will stimulate curiosity and conversation

A coach I know who works with clients on creativity puts under her name, ""Will coach for chocolate". An actor I work with chose "Multiple Personality" as her tag line. It always generates curiosity about what she does and leads to interesting conversations about the kind of acting jobs she is looking for. "Money" is another word that gets people talking and makes an excellent tag line for individuals in banking, finance or related enterprises.

What interesting word or phrase best describes what you do?

Ask for help meeting people

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This one is so simple it can be easily overlooked.

If you don't know anyone at the event you can always ask to be introduced. When you check in at the registration desk, ask someone there to suggest a member or attendee who could introduce you to a few people. If you already know someone at the event, ask that person to help you.

Once the initial introductions have been made, you can ask each new person you meet to introduce you to someone he or she knows. Repeat the process until you have met as many new people as you had intended.

Plan an opening question or statement to get the conversation started

If you've had difficulty in the past starting a conversation with people you don't know, have a better experience at your next event by planning an opening question or statement. A participant at a recent workshop I was leading told us he breaks the ice by asking the person his or her favorite color and why.

Your opening question can be something topical about current events or something surprising like the example. It could even be as simple as asking why this individual chose to attend the event or become a member of the organization it represents.

The key is to plan for success by preparing what you will say in advance.

Bring your business cards!

I meet people all the time who, when I ask them for a card, tell me with much embarrassment and apologies that they "just ran out" or "forgot them". Attending an event without a supply of business cards is unattractive and selfish. It makes it harder for the other person to do business with you--the exact opposite of the impression you want to create.

Keep a supply of cards in your car, briefcase, office, purse and/or pocket. Make sure your cards are easy to access.

I suggest that clients put their cards in a right side pocket so it's easy to reach in and extract one to give to the person they are speaking with. Put the other person's card into your left side pocket. At the end of the event, you will have all the cards in one place. No pockets? Put all the cards you collect into the front of your card case.

When you meet people who are good prospects for your product or service and they say they "just ran out" of cards, show them how you make it easy for people to work with you. Pass them your card with a pencil and ask them to fill out their contact information on the back.

Make notes on the back of the cards you collect to remind yourself later about the people that you've met and what you want to remember about them.

Keep moving!

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Resist the temptation to settle into one place or into conversation with one person, particularly if that person is someone you came with or is someone you already know. If you attend the event with someone, agree to meet at regular intervals to check on each other's progress or arrange to hook up at the end of the event to swap experiences.

Build your network of relationships just the way you want it

Identify who you would like to be a part of your network. Identify those you would like to refer business to, those you would like to partner with and those who would increase your value to your customers. Then make a point to seek out those individuals or organizations.

Develop a follow-up system for keeping in touch with the people you meet. One client sends out email announcements about local events that haven't been covered in the press. She has become known as a source of information about these types of activities. My *Star Maker News* e-newsletter is how I stay connected with the people I meet at various events.

Whatever system you choose, make it reflect who you are and what you represent. It's one more way to be memorable.

Enjoy yourself!

Plan in advance to have a wonderful experience and you will!

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