

Making Connections: Tips for Effective Networking

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Although networking is a skill used by virtually everyone at one time or another, a room full of strangers can be intimidating. Several practical tips and simple techniques, however, can make networking a more comfortable, successful experience.

First, it's important to undertake networking with the right attitude. We encourage our clients to "go all-JFK" on the room – that is, ask not what others can do for you, etc., etc. When you focus on giving, sharing and connecting, you'll be surprised how much you'll receive in return!

Preparation is also key. Take time prior to determine who will be attending. Which industries, organizations and occupations will be represented at the event?

- From a pragmatic standpoint, how will that affect the way you introduce yourself? It's important to tailor your 30-second introduction to be meaningful to those you meet.
- What is the appropriate level of dress for the event?
- It may seem commonsensical, but be sure to carry plenty of business cards. And have a system for keeping the business cards you collect separate from your own.

There are two common types of networking events, the "speed-dating" format and the free-mingle format. The former facilitates a lot of introductions, but without much depth of interaction; an upside to the speed networking approach, however, is that it's possible to target people to connect with later.

Although less structured, the free-mingle format still requires discipline. Some tips we've learned along the way:

- Be a host. Initiate contact, be inclusive, make introductions.
- Be friendly and positive, but remember that everyone is there to meet people. Don't monopolize others' time at the event. Allow about 4-7 minutes for initial interactions, but agree to reconnect later if a deeper discussion is warranted.
- Avoid foursomes – no more than 3 people in a group.
- Don't sit -- you lose the ability to choose with whom you talk.
- If you're attending with colleagues or associates, split up!

(We have lots more tips - - let us know if you'd like to learn more.)

What happens after the networking event is often as critical as what occurred during. Follow-up with a note, letter or e-mail message to your new acquaintances. Hang on to the business cards you collect – on the card, record the date, occasion and any pertinent information about the individual. And be sure to add the individual to your distribution list, phone list or LinkedIn contacts.

Many of us are not easily or naturally inclined to confidently strike up a conversation with a perfect stranger – but by employing preparation and a few techniques, networking can be a rewarding (and dare we say fun) activity!

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