

How to Master Non-Awkward, Effective In-Person Networking

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Remember the good ol' days when we found jobs through ads in the daily newspaper? Hard to believe, especially considering the fact that **70% of jobs are found through personal relationships**, according to John Bennett, director of the Master of Science at the McColl School of Business.

Whether you're trying to develop your personal career or forge new business relationships, making offline, personal connections has become even more critical as online social networking becomes the norm.

“Networking” is a buzzword that many of us have a serious love/hate relationship with. Sure -- we all want to expand our network by meeting new people in our industry, but actually meeting them can feel like a middle school dance all over again ... a painfully, painfully awkward middle school dance.

The web has given us ways to navigate around uncomfortable networking. According to Performics' 2012 Life on Demand Survey, **40% of people feel more comfortable engaging with people online than in person**. While reaching out to new people may be much less intimidating when we're sitting behind a screen, face-to-face networking is an extremely valuable skill to hone if you want to build strong relationships with potential investors, managers, employees, partners, mentors, and clients.

This guide will help you navigate those uncomfortable face-to-face networking situations, so the next time you step into a room of potential connections, you'll feel ready to dive right into relationship-building conversations.

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How to Network Effectively

1. Come prepared with a clear goal in mind.
2. Have some relevant conversation starters.
3. Introduce yourself to someone who is a bigger deal than you.
4. Ask people questions about themselves.
5. Ask for what you want, but be clear it's mutually beneficial.
6. Exit a conversation gracefully.

1. Come prepared with a clear goal in mind.

Next time you're going to an event, ask yourself: "Who do I want to meet, and why?" Certain event registration platforms like Eventbrite show the event's attendee list on the registration page. If a guest list like this is available, take a moment to scan it. See a person or company on the list you've been hoping to connect with? Great -- now look up the guest's LinkedIn profile to learn a little bit more about them so you can seek them out at the event.

I've met tons of great people at events who have since become familiar faces at other industry events. Are these connections unimportant? No. But do I wish I had spent more time seeking out more purposeful connections? Yes.

For instance, let's say you're the CMO of a successful lawn-mowing business. Your business could benefit from finding a new source of potential customers, so you figure a great way to do that would be to start building some co-marketing relationships so you can reach a new audience of potential customers. If this is the case, you may want to consider spending some of your time at the event seeking out people whose business is complementary to yours -- perhaps a home improvement vendor -- with which you can build relationships that lead to possible co-marketing opportunities.

Do you want to spread awareness about a new project you're starting? Do you want to meet an industry leader who can become a valuable mentor? Do you want to find potential new hires for open positions at your company? **Having a clear goal in mind will make networking less ambiguous and lead to more effective connections.**

2. Have some relevant conversation starters.

Approaching a big or small group can be intimidating, but with the right approach, you can join in on an existing conversation, or start your own successfully. Ease into the evening by introducing yourself to one person who is also flying solo and looking for someone to talk to.

Ahead of time, read up on industry news and trends so you'll be prepared to spark conversation and ask for other people's thoughts on topics that are interesting to both of you. This is especially important if you're attending an event outside your industry. I once helped organize a marketing and technology event with many sponsors, including a law firm. At first, they were hesitant about connecting with an audience outside their area of expertise. But by checking out a few prominent blogs and scanning industry news, they felt much more confident to meet marketers, and they made some valuable connections that night.

Your first connection at an event is your gateway to meeting more people. Maybe they came with friends they can introduce you to, or maybe you'll decide to break into bigger groups together. Whoever you approach first, **relieve some of the awkwardness with informed, relevant conversation starters to get in the swing of things together.**

3. Introduce yourself to someone who is a bigger deal than you.

We sometimes walk into networking events with high hopes of meeting the CEO of a company we admire, or the author of a book that kickstarted our career. We're so thrilled to be in the same place as them, but suddenly, you spot them across the room and become nervous, awkward, and who knows -- maybe even a little bit sweaty.

So how can you successfully strike up a conversation with this mini-celebrity from your industry's *People* magazine without making a total fool of yourself?

First and foremost -- make sure you have purpose. Butting into their conversation to tell them you love their work or admire their approach to business will not invite stimulating conversation. In fact, it's more likely to evoke a simple "thank you." Consider what it is about this person that resonated with you, and tie it into your work, projects, or philosophy.

Approach them with confidence, and introduce yourself not as a fan, but as an equal (**because you are**), and say something thought-provoking that they can relate to, like, "Your applications of inbound marketing for nonprofits was helpful for me at my last job, but I'm transitioning into a job in the pharmaceutical industry. Would you change your inbound marketing approach if you were me?" Remember that you admire this person because you respect their thought leadership. **Give them a chance to admire you, too, by sparking an interesting and relevant conversation.**

4. Ask people questions about themselves.

Often, we meet someone and exchange our names, company, job title, and where we grew up in about three minutes. Then we smile, look at the ground, and say something like "I love your shirt."

Smooth.

When the small talk is up, it's easy for the conversation to go south. I've learned to avoid this by making *them* the topic of conversation. I was on the verge of an awkward silence at a networking event once, but when I referenced a project I was working on I was met with a genuine "Tell me about that." I was not only impressed by this person's casual cue for me to keep talking, but I was instantly intrigued by them, too.

You may be thinking, how can I make connections if we just talk about them the whole time? And to that I would say -- showing genuine interest in another person can say more about you than talking about yourself could.

Besides, if a person doesn't reciprocate the behavior and encourage you to tell them about yourself afterward, then they probably weren't a valuable connection to begin with. **Next time a conversation is flailing, ask for them to elaborate or tell you more about themselves and you'll find talking points you'll be able to expand on.**

5. Ask for what you want, but be clear it's mutually beneficial.

The highlight of networking events we all fantasize about is leaving with a concrete exchange that will move our business or career forward. Maybe it's a job offer, getting an investor on board, locking down a recommendation letter, or landing a client you've been after for months.

Whatever the highlight, it isn't going to fall in our lap. We can play all the right cards to set us up for a the big moment, but a time will come when we need to put ourselves out there and firmly express what we want. How can we do this without sounding aggressive?

Consider your answer to the classic job interview question "Why should we hire you over the other candidates?" You come up with a true, succinct, humble, and exemplary answer of why you're the right person for the job. Your approach to getting what you want from networking isn't all that different, except it's important to express your flexibility.

In her book *Lean In*, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg references a time a woman approached her asking for a job by asking what her core business problems were and how she could fix them. This combination of flexibility and confidence in getting the job done is a brilliant way to frame your next big ask. **Be firm on what you want, but be clear that what you want is mutually beneficial.**

6. Exit a conversation gracefully.

It's important to remember that networking isn't like speed-dating. The goal isn't to meet as many people as you can -- it's to make valuable connections. While it's important not to rush through conversations for this reason, there are times when we need to jump ship. Whether you're chatting with someone who won't let you get a word in, or someone who is wasting time whining about their boss, you should still be polite when ending the conversation.

If there's a lull in conversation, say "Please let me know how that project goes, I'd love to see it and hear how it turns out." This will show you were engaged, and though it ends the conversation in the moment, they won't feel offended. Alternatively, consider asking them "Have you seen anyone from [company name] tonight? I've been meaning to chat with them." This will kindly express that it's important to you to expand your network. **In the future, if you need to get out of a torturous conversation, end the discussion in the moment, but keep it feeling open-ended for the future.**

We sometimes meet people at events that spark our interest even though we don't have any projects, mutual friends, or upcoming events to connect with about. But you never know who you may want advice or guidance from in the future.

For instance, I once met the CEO of a small video marketing firm at an event. Even though I didn't work in video, I felt we connected during our conversation. He mentioned his son had just become a freshman at my alma mater. I followed up via LinkedIn and told him how nice it was to meet him, and to let me know if his son had any questions about starting at college. Shortly after, he put in a great word with my then-boss about meeting me and told me to reach out to him in the future. **Ultimately, following-up with a personal connection helps you differentiate and solidify the relationship.**

Plan on attending a networking event soon? Leave awkwardness at the door by walking in with full confidence. Remember -- the outcome of the evening is up to you.

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