

Seven Ways to Connect at a Networking Event

By Dean Lindsay – Progress Agent (TM)

So your going to a networking function that you have never been to before (or maybe even one you have) determined to crack the networking code and start building priceless business relationships. Be aware that it's possible to go to a networking event and not have any 'networking moments.' It is not just about showering and showing up. It's about connecting with people and finding ways to help them progress. Here are seven proven strategies for making contact at networking events.

1. Go it alone.

When attending networking functions, go by yourself or at least communicate to your carpool buddies that you should all fan out. Moving about a networking event solo encourages people to approach you and makes it easy to mingle and initiate conversations. It may be more comfortable to have a friend right there with you, but remember: you are there to grow your network, not hang with the people already in your network.

2. Stand near the registration table.

After you have registered and put on your nametag, take advantage of the many opportunities to make small talk with new arrivals after they have signed in. These are the couple of minutes when most people are alone and interested in someone new to communicate with. Even something really easygoing like, "Looks like a good turnout..." is probably good enough to get a friendly conversation started. Remember that like you, people are there to make new contacts. And if they are not, they are in the wrong place.

3. Study the tags.

If nametags are preprinted and on display at the registration table, scan the tags of the other attendees to see what opportunities await you. Here's something, though I have not tried this myself, Rachel Wood, a top financial advisor in the Boston area who introduced herself to me after one of my CODE Crackers Networking seminars, does something pretty neat. If she spots a nametag on the registration table of someone she would like to meet, she asks the people manning the table if she can clip a note to their tag saying she would like to meet them. She swears by it.

4. Circle and scan.

Before diving into the event, try circling the room and checking out the nametags for people or companies you definitely want to make contact with while there.

5. Look for people standing alone.

These folks may be nervous, and your initiative will often endear you to them. Plus, one-on-one networking is the best networking.

It is hard to join a group unless invited.

6. Sit between people you do not know well.

If the event is a sit-down affair, do not sit by a friend or business associate. You already know that person! You might be sitting there a while, so make sure you are going to be sitting by someone you can form a new relationship with. Plan who you want to sit by, but wait until the last minute to actually sit down so you can keep making new contacts.

7. Hang out at the food table.

I know it sounds like I'm joking, but people tend to be easily accessible around food. Stand near the food table, but not the bar. People tend to grab their drinks and move away from the bar, but are more likely to linger near the grub.

As people check out the buffet table, small talk comes more easily. "That Danish looks good..." is as good an opener as any. Once they have their hands full, people often look for a flat surface where they can place their plate and beverage. Take a spot next to them and get to chatting.

Check this out. Our endorphin levels are higher when we are close to food, which boosts our memory and the chance that we will remember and be remembered. We humans are a trip, aren't we?

One quick DON'T

Don't go to networking functions hungry.

Eat before you go so you can focus on the person, not the cantaloupe. If you are hungry, grab a quick bite off to the side, and then mingle. And don't talk with your mouth full. (I hope I didn't need to write that.)