

# NETWORKING IN THE NEW NORMAL

How Meeting Professionals Can Make  
Virtual More Human



*Jerry Fletcher*  
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## *Jerry Fletcher,* **Networking Ninja**

Jerry Fletcher has been speaking as the Networking Ninja since 1993. He is the CEO of Z-axis Marketing, Inc. a Certified Professional Consultant since 1990 and a Professional Member

of the National Speakers Association (NSA) since 1993 Jerry has spoken on 3 Continents as well as authored 3 books and 5 Trust-based Experience products.

This expert at business development crafts unique, trust-based strategies to build practices, brands and lives of joy working with elite consultants from Singapore to Madrid.

He has:

- Raised over \$500,000 for a start-up in 17 days
- Increased the Q1 sales of a consulting firm by over \$1.2 Million with a single suggestion.
- Increased a software company's sales by 400% in 18 months by "tweaking" their Contact Relationship Management system.
- Stopped counting successful product and service introductions at 207.
- Positioned 137 consultants successfully at last count.

His strategic marketing acumen has been applied successfully for new and established independent professionals of all types. He has an on-going passion for finding marketing solutions for business start-ups, strategic branding and repositioning of companies, launching high-tech products, recording software sales increases as well as introducing new products for B2B companies.

Jerry tells us he offices and lives south of Portland Oregon, "where the sidewalk runs out."

*“Virtual meetings don’t help  
with the all-important  
networking piece”*

**Megan Tallman, CMP**  
Financial Planning Association  
Manager, Conferences and Meetings

I told Megan that I was working on providing a guide to Networking in the New Normal. She noted that networking was one of the greatest member benefits of Associations and a key element in all kinds of meetings. That caused me to broaden my research to include specific advice for meeting professionals whether they are working in a corporation, association, or staging events.

I see what is being done at meetings all the time and when I come across innovation in the area of Networking at meetings I report it to my friends in the meeting professional ranks. In the past I’ve reported new ice-breakers, non-alcoholic mixers featuring multiple kinds of deserts and multiple forms of speed dating adapted for networking.

Once I was engaged by a major technology company to speak to two divisions of the firm that would be a massive presence at two upcoming trade shows.

**Make sure  
the  
technology  
enables  
networking  
behavior.**

**Don’t let it  
get in the  
way.**

The reason was that they were mostly engineers and not well versed in communication skills. A number of them were somewhat introverted as well.

The meeting room at the corporate headquarters was spacious allowing seating for about 200 but I had to be careful of where I moved at the front of the room in order to stay on camera for the live feed video being sent out over their network to their meeting rooms in New York, Chicago, Denver, Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

15 minutes before I was to go on they advised me that no employees in either division had business cards! They remarked that contact information could easily be exchanged as everyone had a cell phone. I disagreed and did an interactive survey while I was speaking to determine:

- How many would like to have business cards?
- How many were confident they could enter someone's name and e-mail during a conversation?
- How many were comfortable sending strangers their data via phone?

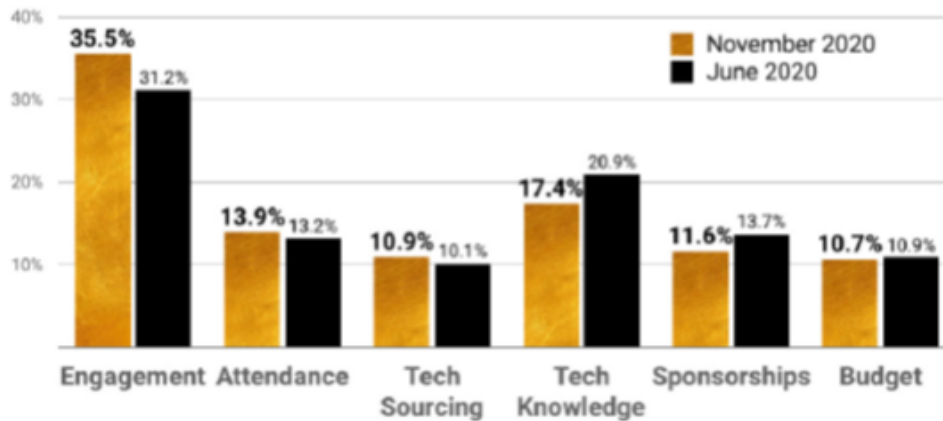
(A week later the meeting planner advised, "There is happy dancing in the aisles as division management has authorized business cards.")

### **The point**

The point of this story is that human beings have enough difficulty interacting with strangers. Do not let technology get in the way. Understand human networking behavior. Opt for the technology that makes it easiest for people to network. In this case, business cards were a better technology solution.

## Going Forward

Event professionals concur that engagement is the number one challenge they have with virtual events.



Source: Event Manager Blog.

Current estimates are that we will be in a partial Covid-19 Lockdown at least until mid-summer 2021. Even then it is probable that we will not revert completely to the way things were. In the interim, MPI (Meeting Professionals International) is reporting on how to deal with social distancing and wearing masks and how to keep attendees adhering to the changed circumstances. Recovery will happen but the timing is still a mystery.

Considered opinion appears to be that meetings after 2021 will be smaller, hybrid more than live and that the digital component will become more significant.

Production values of the digital component will equal that of the live meeting.

Event production companies will have teams focused on the virtual experience alone.



We can expect more sophisticated virtual participation options, satellite events in conjunction with larger gatherings and constant attempts to find ways to begin relationships when handshakes are no longer the norm.

Human nature suggests that for a time those with lower risk acceptance will cause former large events to be distributed with smaller live events in

multiple cities linked by virtual segments or a larger event for those less fearful of travel. Smaller live component cities will be digitally linked to the key city for a major portion of the event.

### **On the other side**

Our need to meet face to face will return. The real question is how much our need to connect with other people will drive our desires in the face of remembered health concerns.

This report and others like it are being prepared with three audiences in mind:

1. Meeting professionals that plan and implement events including sponsors)
2. Speakers and Experts that provide the educational component of gatherings
3. Attendees

As it says on the cover, this report deals with how meeting professionals can make the virtual more human.

# Everything Old Is New Again

**Technology is lagging but bringing new capabilities almost daily.**

I speak internationally and continually search out venues and events that cater to independent professionals searching for business development advice. That's why I had contacted Elise Acosta of Entrepnr (Asia's community for entrepreneurs & marketers). This morning I found an invitation in my e-mail from Elise to a "Christmas Mingle," a virtual cocktail party hosted from their Hong Kong headquarters using software called Airmeet.

Here's what the invitation said:

Holidays are a busy period, both for business owners and professionals alike. Most of us are turning back to the good old pen and paper to put together all kinds of to-do lists. But why not include us in one of them?

Join us on December 17 at 7 pm HK/SG time and enjoy festivities whilst networking with like-minded entrepreneurs and marketers from all over Asia-Pacific and across a range of sectors/industries!

RSVP now at <https://www.airmeet.com/e/125b49e0-3451-11eb-8a75-3be5c13c1a9d>

What to expect:

- A social lounge: with various networking tables where you can connect with each other and have real-time video discussions.
- Speed networking: spend 3 minutes meeting someone new 1:1, great to facilitate introductions between people who don't know each other.
- Lucky draw: 5 winners will receive a one-year individual membership each giving you unlimited access to all our events scheduled in 2021 (and the replays too from 2020).

We look forward to meeting you on December 17!

Merry Christmas!

The Entrepnr Team  
[www.entrepnr.com](http://www.entrepnr.com)

P.S. if you are based in China, please use a VPN to access the platform!



They are offering two Networking situations which, on the surface, are wonderful opportunities but are they really? Live networking has forever had an open bar sometimes with hors d'oeuvres and the expectation that guests will mingle, introduce themselves and begin relationships that will lead to business opportunities.

What if you're an introvert?

What if you are a complete stranger?

What if you find yourself having to cope with a technology new to you?

### **Social Lounge solutions**

In the live event you can do any number of things. Some of the most common:

- Have a corps of introducer/facilitators to perform the first introduction
- Offer prizes for checked off "Bingo cards" which require a booth or table visit to get each item checked off
- Serve up defined table topics and experts to facilitate the discussion

### **Recommendation**

Steal a page from the National Speakers Association (at least that is where I first saw it) called **Meet the Pros**

Here's the way it works. Each table has an expert host and a designated topic. If you have a lot of attendees you can have them pick their top 5 tables to attend in advance knowing that only 3 will be awarded. The attendees are told their tables before each round. When the doors open



they go to the first table where the expert does a short briefing asks folks to introduce themselves and ask one question. Sessions are brief, no longer than 15 minutes. Noting contact information allows later contact between the participants. When time is up the expert remains and awaits the next group.



Taking advantage of digital:

1. Provide the name, company name and e-mail for each participant at each table attended This eliminates the need to exchange contact info one at a time and gives the visitor the data they need to reach out. Allow the ability to set up private rooms for 1to1 discussions.
2. Forget scheduling. Maintain expert moderators but post subject at each table. Allow open attendance but identify each person at a table on their screen and provide their contact data in the chat.
3. Use the open approach noted in 2 above but have the participants enter their contact data in the chat as they arrive. Allow those present digitally to copy the chat and furnish it to them after the meeting.

### **Speed Networking solutions**

My friend, Vanessa Van Edwards (Science of People), reports that in a study of an in-person Networking event, the most successful networker turned out to be the bartender.

Think about that. Most folks that entered the room had to make contact with the bartender at least once and a conversation could easily have ensued. The same study confirmed that most people spent time with people they already knew.

**"People would rather have a conversation than listen to a commercial."**

*-Jerry Fletcher*

Speed networking is a way to force more contact with strangers. In a live event, it is a bit frantic as people feel forced to deliver an "elevator speech" when all they really wanted was to determine if there was someone they wanted to dialogue with.

Most meetings or conventions do not have a speed networking event. Networking is treated as a "natural function that occurs in the hallways between scheduled presentations." At times, there will be a designated Networking item on the agenda. Here are some of the ways I've seen that presented:

- Desserts and Networking Desserts are substituted for hors d'oeuvres at an evening event or to get dessert after lunch attendees must move to another room with stand-up tables and a wide selection of pies, cakes etc are offered.
- In Europe where trade shows are sometimes held on Cruise ships, the attendee agrees to meet, by appointment, with company representatives at a given place on the ship in order to be allowed aboard. He or she is presented with appropriate tickets and event invitations and a luncheon or dinner seating before the event.
- Host a quiet space where introverts who find the noise and bustle of most conventions and tradeshow wearing can regroup mentally. The host, like the bartender, will have the most success in starting relationships.

### **Recommendation**

Bonding over food and drink is ingrained in human behavior but you can't do it digitally. What you can do is acknowledge that the personality of the attendee is genetic. It can range from introvert to ambivert to extrovert. All of them are uncomfortable with forced networking.

Don't force it. Enhance the natural approach for each segment of attendees. Up to half of those involved in your virtual event are not aggressively seeking networking opportunities.

**Introverts** get energy from being solo and having time to think things through. They prefer minimal hubbub.

**Ambiverts** exhibit behavior of both ends of the spectrum depending on the mood and the people they are with.

**Extroverts** are turned on by being in a crowd and confident in that situation.

The best live event solution I've seen is the **Drop in Quiet Corner**. Here's how it works: A quiet room (one with a view is best) is set up with tables for four. Each table has a sign indicating a number and a suggested table topic. Included in those topics are "Quiet" and Breakout Speaker. At the door to the room is a bulletin board marked off with the hours of the conference with index cards saying "I'll be here" or "I'm here now" with a space for a business card or to write in a name and company name. (A similar card could be handed out at registration.)

#### Taking advantage of Digital

1. Make the **Drop in Quiet Corner** a series of breakout rooms/tables which all attendees can access at any time. Include a sign-up card in online registration that includes a photo of the attendee and their contact information which is posted on a secure mobile site for use of attendees only. Update the "room calendar" in the app and on a display at the entry of the room hour by hour for hybrid events.
2. In addition, allow individuals to request a time to meet with anyone in the attendee list with the request being forwarded to the desired individual by the digital operators of the event. On acceptance, Breakout room/table is assigned.
3. Have Breakout speakers announce in their sessions when they will be available in the Quiet Corner if attendees have additional questions.

## Digital Capability Can Enhance Non-Dues Revenue



What this environment has taught us is – what digital was really intended for in the first place – is that your attendees just want fewer steps between them and all your services.

According to EventMB's latest research, 67 percent of respondents agree that hybrid is the future of

events and 71 percent said that they would continue to employ a digital strategy even after live events return.

Hybrid events are predicted to be king because they will be the only way to include those unable to attend in person. Very large events have forever suffered from a lack of personalization. The New Normal is an opportunity to move from Networking as we've known it to Meaningful Connections.

An event planner friend in a mastermind group asked me to appear at a Lawyer Summit next spring. It is slated to be a virtual event but the planning included both the hub and spoke approach of a live event in one city with virtual events in other cities and finding venues to support live speakers being beamed to the virtual participants. In addition, they sought out software to take the experience to a new level for the entire experience. Here is how she described their criteria:

“ We want an all-in-one platform. It must have on-line registration for three or more levels of participation, website, ability to handle all the presentations both live and virtual with the capacity to allow virtual participants to choose breakouts or on-on-one networking or sponsor visits all with high production values. Downline we will want to incorporate recorded presentations in our educational efforts possibly having speakers do updates and interactive virtual sessions linked to their recorded presentations.”

I don't know if they got the full package but this is one of the first times I've been asked by an association to put together the digital information using an online portal and to schedule an on-line professionally directed video prior to the event. (For the record, I've provided materials including personalized pre-recorded videos for corporate clients in the past.)

### **Business plan contributor**

Covid played havoc with non-dues revenues. Now, the digital know-how coming out of virtual necessity can bring new vitality to the mission of your organization. Here's how:

**Personalize your community** Automate follow up to generate membership when someone registers for an event. Make all member communications personalized to increase the value of the organization to the member. Make the most of their connections by coming up with a unique hashtag for your event. Encourage them to interact with each other on social media and reach out to online friends.

**Use a subscription model to fund ongoing events** This is particularly useful for local chapters as it provides a working budget for the year. For state, regional or national level the same budget boost applies but advance scheduling knowledge will increase attendance at events whether live, virtual or hybrid.

**Employ tier pricing** That summit I mentioned earlier used this approach offering three ascending levels of ticketing: Virtual Event, All Arguments and Chambers Discussions. Sherine suggested that in Future Hybrid events they may charge less for Live attendance than virtual due to the power of in-person connections to generate long term value perceptions.

**Build education income** Your events can help build the tools to keep your community engaged year-round. Use on-demand capability to repurpose presentations for education. Start with this end in mind and establish a better way to deliver content. A video of a speaker presentation is not enough. Work with your speakers and your education staff to implement better program packaging. Steal an idea from the Corporate world and purchase on-going involvement with expert speakers for refreshers or extended engagement with your members. You might want to consider offering information in audio only as well as other formats.

**Engage audiences in new ways** Think about different formats for on-line and offline and the crossover required in hybrid events. That may require finding new touchpoints for the old keynote, breakout, panel discussion approach, shifting to multiple formats (including audio only) or rethinking overall event design from the core.

## *Sponsors Can Help You Push The Limits Of Engagement*

While speaking on Contact Relationship Management in South America I was invited to a special lunch in Bogota by the event manager. The lunch was hosted by one of the sponsors of the event (Oracle). The sponsor's country manager, his sales manager and about a dozen of their prospects were seated along the arms of a U-shaped table. We three keynoters were seated at the center at the bottom of the U.

The interpreter, along with the country manager, served as emcee and the guests got to meet us and ask any questions they liked during the meal. The questions ranged from establishing Trust with customers which I spoke on after lunch to where CRM was going in the future to how to implement it in a sales force that didn't like computers.

The sponsor made a lot of points with potential customers by using human nature to further their cause: They made it possible to meet and question experts in a comfortable setting, They introduced a group of innovative CEOs to one another. They generated interest in receiving ongoing information from sales engineers and training staff.

### **More winners to come**

Events, conventions and meetings of all types are going to be more experiential. There will be more sponsorship opportunities because the technological advances will make it easier than before. Brands that have been on the sidelines including smaller companies will now be able to get involved particularly with virtual and hybrid events. The competition among sponsors will, I believe lead to creative breakthroughs.

Past Sponsor Packages included:

- Identification of the sponsor in all communications, booth space in events that include trade shows and entrance to the general admission portions of the gathering for a number of staff members.
- Announcement of meal benefactors as well as those providing books, access to special events as well as both pre- and post-event workshop promotions. And the ever-popular swag bag.
- More recently there were sponsored morning runs and yoga sessions and wellness breaks throughout the day. A few adventurous organizations provided apps and when budgets allowed wi-fi access.

## **Recommendation**

Consider three important factors when developing your sponsor package. First, the reasons folks attend with emphasis on the problems they are looking to solve. Second, what potential sponsors are trying to accomplish by getting involved with your meeting. And third, how you can adapt the sponsor package to the potential sponsors brand. Stir Digital into the mix. Offer a digital swag bag. The event web site could have a page with offers from sponsors before, during, and after your event. That way sponsors can connect with more attendees, and provide meaningful data to measure against their goals. Stay tuned to the market for even more fast forward possibilities like Virtual Reality. You are probably going to do a survey of guests. Sponsors might pay handily for answers to some of their questions.

Event apps can work for a sponsor in live, virtual or hybrid assemblies. Wi-fi is the lifeblood of many attendees. Find way to include it particularly if you want social media exposure of your event. (Remember that hash tag suggestion from earlier?) Sometimes we all need privacy. A pod with power and wi-fi is a great sponsor item in live events. Consider having someone doing livestream interviews. It's easy in live events but can be a showstopper in the downtime/breaks of a virtual event.



## Taking advantage of Digital

Revise your sponsorship pitch Digital gives you the ability to measure activities in behalf of a sponsor beyond the number of attendees exposed to logos and signage. It gives you a way to assure that the sponsor gets solid analytics for the activities in which they engage.

Put Gamification into sponsor activities The corporate world is discovering the power of the short attention span methods used in computer games to produce a hypnotic effect. Sales Force is one of the best known users of this technique.

Make your speakers stars Allow major sponsors access to your keynoters for a Meet and Greet similar to my luncheon experience in Bogota. Get agreements with your professional speakers to provide information and materials beyond the event appearance paid by the sponsor who gets full credit with current members who attend and those that pay for the educational materials later in the year.

Make Expert Members that speak memorable Offer sponsors a deal to have member experts visit with prospects and provide third party reviews of the sponsor's product. Again, this will work in Live, Virtual or Hybrid settings

Combine one or more digital approaches People gravitate to photo booths. A digital one that offers gag photos at the event live or virtual makes for great social media postings. Someone to help you with your photo might be required and a second person might do live streaming with you while you wait in line. Photos might be added to the web site on a sponsored page. How about a Twitter wall at a live event or as a page on the web site for a virtual event.

*From strangers to connections to clients  
and customers,  
Trust is the binding force.*

On and offline, in business and personal affairs that single idea can light your way to success. Jerry tailors his talks to your meeting theme and motivates attendees while providing laughs and candid insights into the power of traditional approaches plus wizardly ways to use the internet.

His presentations are all about getting to Trust...Memorably

Jerry comes in early and gets acquainted with attendees often putting their comments into his keynotes. He is a keen observer of how meetings incorporate technology and was speaking virtually before Covid-19 forced all of us to learn how.

**A partial list of organizations that have profited from Jerry's experience:**

ASTD, Americas Impresarial, Automobile Service Association, American Marketing Association, Association of Accounting Marketing, Association of Home Businesses, Association of Legal Administrators, Brand management Summit, The Center for Estate Planning, Computer Consultants of Oregon,

Financial Planning Association, Hamers & Okawa, Hastings & Humble, Hoffman, Stewart & Schmidt, Institute of Management

Consultants International Association of Career Management Professionals, FLeo Law Offices, Lewis & Associates, McGee Financial

Group Metro RV Dealers, Meeting Planners Int'l, National Association of Purchasing Managers, National Association of Professional Organizers NW Coaches Association, NW Concrete Pipe Association, Oregon Business Travel Association,

S Perkins & Co. P.C. Pearson Financial, Portland Area Business Association, Portland Business Alliance Portland Oregon Visitors Association, Progression Conference, Sales & Marketing Executives International Summer Financial Group, The Alternative Board, U.S. Department of Energy, WBH Financial Services



**“Who you  
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But the  
single most  
important  
thing for  
business  
success is  
who trusts  
you.”**

*Jerry Fletcher*

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