



## Networking: The Fear Is Real

I have a confession. I'm an extrovert who is terrified of talking to people. When I receive an invitation to a "networking" event, I freeze in horror. My mind latches on to past networking event trauma. The cliques who won't let you into the conversation. The feeling of dread trying to catch someone, anyone's eye and when you do, the embarrassment as you realize they are looking at someone else. The rejection when the person you are talking to is more interested in the conversation next to you, and of course, talking to the one person who won't let you go. Yikes. So, I usually avoid networking events. (Counterintuitive for a solopreneur, I know.)

Then it came. A former colleague invited me to a networking event. And to be honest, my blood went cold. But the only way to combat fear is to face it head on, so I put on my new suede boots and went.

In advance of the event, I did some research on networking but some of the tips felt clunky and forced. So, I dug deep and decided that I would use the networking event as a research project and ask the participants to share their tips on talking to people. Cool ice breaker, huh? Well, some of the participants thought I was nuts, but most were completely open and willing to share. The task I created for myself transformed me from a scaredy cat to a more confident person when talking with others. The results of my experiment are below. (I thank all of the wonderful people I spoke to for their invaluable tips!)

### Networking tips crowdsourced from the pros!

**Use the namebadge as a powerful first impression.** If you go to a networking event and are looking for work, instead of leaving the "company" area blank on your name badge, add, "Looking for a job," or "Need to find a new career." The participant I spoke to said when she was actively looking for a job, this technique helped and people came up to her and started a conversation. It's worth a try!

**Volunteer to work the registration table.** Volunteering for the organization who is hosting the networking event will provide you with valuable insights. Having a task such as greeting guests, handing out programs or selling raffle tickets gives you instant access to the attendees and allows you to just be yourself. The participant I spoke to added that by working the registration desk you get to know the attendees' names and companies so you can target your list of people to meet.

**Ambassadors/mentors/buddy system.** If you are new, ask if the organization has a mentor/ambassador program where you can connect with someone who is more seasoned. The mentor/ambassador can take you around the room and introduce you to people. Having an introduction is a great way to confidently start a conversation. If the organization doesn't have an ambassador program, bring a buddy. Two people are better than one. Use your buddy as your professional wing person which makes it much easier to strike up a conversation. If things go well, your buddy can move on, but if not, your buddy can rescue you! These were terrific suggestions from two people I met last night – one was new to the program and the other was more seasoned but shared her buddy system idea from when she was a newbie.

**Have a goal in mind before you arrive.** Who do you want to meet? What do you want to get out of the event? How many contacts do you wish to make? Having a clear goal will alleviate some of the initial anxiety of talking to people, because you are focusing solely on the people that meet the criteria of your goal. The participant I spoke to suggested that in addition to having a goal also have 2-3 questions ready in advance. "Get in the conversation, get out of the conversation quickly" And the next time you see the person, make sure they know you are very excited to see them.

**Just stand still.** There is something to be said for just standing still. Position yourself in the middle of the room. Stand or sit at a table and smile with confidence. It's inevitable that someone will come to your table, set down food or drink. It's your opportunity to strike up a conversation. I saw this happen several times last night and remembered a former professional coach saying to me that being still is the best way to attract others. But your body language must be open and approachable or you will be sitting alone...

**Develop the relationship by having a conversation.** My favorite moment at the networking event was with one of the vendor sponsors. He didn't have a networking tip, just a thought on why people are afraid of networking. As a self-proclaimed introvert, he said the fear is real. Talking to people means you may be rejected. No one likes rejection. But you don't have to have a pitch or a hard sell. Just have a conversation. Get to know someone. People respond to those they like and trust. Don't push. Coming to events like this for years gave him perspective.

**Follow up in a timely manner.** Last piece of advice. Follow up with everyone you meet at the event. Don't delay. You worked hard for that connection – don't let it go cold.

I am grateful to my colleague for inviting me to last night's event and happy to have met so many wonderful people. It was a unique opportunity for me to push my anxiety aside and learn from the experience! I walked away with a new way of looking at networking. Listen, we are all

afraid, so we just have to take it slow. And consistency is key – the more events you attend, the easier it gets.... That is my hope.

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