

Networking Comfortably

Counterintuitively, you don't have to be an extrovert to be successful at networking. Many people dislike networking because they think that it's more difficult than it is. Some of the best networking opportunities that I've had occurred when I was tired, would rather have been elsewhere, or when I was preoccupied. The assumption that some people make is that they have to approach others when networking. The reality of the situation is that if you're standing or sitting in the right place and have a welcoming expression on your face, people will approach you. A sincere smile is helpful too.

Regarding where to place yourself in the room, if there's a food table, stand right near it as practically everyone in the room will make his or her way to the table. If you've tasted any of the food, you can comment to whomever about what's delicious and/or what to avoid. If only beverages are being served, plant yourself near them. I once found myself near yummy cookies and books for the attendees of the event that I was attending. I was looking for a place to sit and had the good fortune to find a place that was appealing to others for a few reasons. (Who can resist yummy-looking cookies and a free book?) If memory serves, I had four very enjoyable conversations, that evening, one of which led to a business friendship.

In terms of working the room, my style of networking is more about having quality conversations than it is about talking with everyone in the room. I also, typically, don't give anyone my business card when I first meet him or her. It's better to talk with the person for a while before offering your card as, this way, he or she will be more interested in receiving your card.

There are people in the networking world who don't know how to dress for the occasion. In a business setting, it's not especially impressive to wear a low cut or tight dress, blouse, or skirt. You also don't want to overpower (or nauseate) people with your perfume or cologne or turn them off by wearing heavy makeup. You should dress in attractive business attire or something that is appropriate for the venue at which the event is being held. You should wear clothing that you're comfortable in and that fits you well.

Not everyone is skilled at conversing with people whom they've never met before. To be a good conversationalist, you need to ask questions and pay attention to the person's responses. You don't have to talk a lot: you just have to focus on active listening. In addition, it isn't necessary to say something brilliant or funny when initiating a conversation. You can start off with small talk. As most people like to talk about themselves, it is entirely appropriate, at a business event, to ask someone what he or she does for a living, how or why he or she got into that occupation or profession, what he or she likes most about the work, least about the work, etc.

When you meet someone with whom you'd like to follow up, send a brief email shortly after you've met saying how much you enjoyed meeting him or her and allude to the conversation that you had. Either that or send the person an article or an invitation to an event that you think might interest him or her.

Networking isn't rocket science. To succeed at it, you need to be approachable, friendly, and interested in other people. In addition to meeting potential clients, potential employers and/or potential employees, you can even meet people who become valued friends.