

Tips and Ideas for Stress Free Networking

The thought of attending networking events and functions can be terrifying to some people and even slightly unsettling for the most confident amongst us. Here are the three top things that people worry about the most when attending networking functions and how you can avoid them.

1. Juggling, food, beverages and hand shaking

One of the most common unspoken fears amongst people networking is “how will I shake hands, exchange business cards, juggle my food and drink at the function without spilling it and looking foolish?” I have three simple rules that I follow when attending functions:

a) **Where possible eat before you go.** Unfortunately most function centers, restaurants and conference venues serve food that is not networking friendly. You will often be in a situation where you are left holding a chicken bone, stick or oyster shell making it difficult to meet people and exchange cards. Eating before you go will assist you by minimising the chance of spilling food, drink or having something green stay in your teeth for all to see. And importantly you will be more focused on what is going on around you and less likely to stalk the waiter looking for food because you haven't eaten all day.

b) **Avoid alcohol at business functions.** Now don't get me wrong I love a wine as much as the next person, but not everyone does and you certainly do not want to be the 'drunk' at the event or breathing your alcohol breath on others. Remember it is a business function and not party time! If you must drink alternate alcohol with water or ask for a half glass serving.

c) **Make sure you are hands free.** Hands free allows you to readily access your business cards to exchange and shake hands with those that you meet. Ensure that you leave a good arms length between you and the person you are meeting. Many people value their 'personal space' and you want to allow yourself the best opportunity to make an impression.

2. Networking friendly clothes

I like to wear what I refer to as networking friendly clothes. I select clothing items (jackets) that have pockets so that I can always have easy access to my business cards and a place to put cards from the people I meet. For the ladies it is imperative to select a networking friendly handbag that is again easy to access your business cards. For the gentlemen if you can get away with not taking your briefcase this is

ideal, if you can't see if there is somewhere at the venue you can check it in or have it stored safely until your departure. The last thing you want to be doing all event, is some type of pow wow dancing around your briefcase. It will be distracting for you and the people you meet.

Wear comfortable shoes, especially if you are standing at an event, leaning from one side to another looks uncomfortable and can be distracting. If wearing high heels, ensure your weight is distributed evenly and your stance is even you will be able to stand for much longer and remain focused on your conversations rather than your sore tired feet!

3. Being left alone, talking to a bore and breaking into group conversations.

If you are worried about not knowing anyone at the function or event and having no-one to talk to make sure you call ahead and **ask** the organizer to introduce you when you arrive to someone so that you won't be left standing alone. It is in the event organizers best interests to do this as they want their attendees to have an enjoyable experience.

Extracting yourself from a boring or teeth pulling conversation is probably one of the most stressful networking experiences you can have and it is usually what stops most people from attending functions regularly. Before you go to an event be armed with some well directed questions that can steer the conversation the way you want it to go or be prepared with some standard 'extraction' techniques. Some of my favourites "excuse me I need to use the bathroom" (if you use this make sure you actually go) "I have come here today with an aim to meet three new people, it's been great speaking with you. Please excuse me". Include a third person in the conversation and extract yourself in a pleasant and friendly manner.

There are two ways in which I have found to best break into existing conversations. The first is to make eye contact with one of the people and smile at them and simply ask if you can join in the conversation "do you mind if I join you?" simple! In all the networking I have done and the thousands I have spoken to no-one has ever experienced 'no you can't'. And secondly my favourite get someone else to break in and introduce you. I know I mentioned it earlier but the organizer really does want you to enjoy yourself and not feel stressed, ask them to introduce you. Thirdly take a buddy that can do the 'conversation openers' for you. Be careful not to just speak to them for the entire event as this will contradict what you are aiming to do.

Above all else remember to be yourself, talk about the things you know and are passionate about. Always ask questions and enjoy yourself, networking is not meant to be a stressful activity. In fact it really can be a lot of fun and extremely rewarding.

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