

This article first appeared in **AccountingWeb** on 05/06/08.

How to shine at social networking

By **Jack Downton**

It is seven o'clock in the evening and your local Chamber of Commerce's annual party is in full swing. Wherever you turn, everyone seems to be animated in conversation as the champagne flows and canapés are being served. Everyone, apart from you that is.

You know this is the perfect opportunity to make some great business contacts or get to know other colleagues. So why is it that you're counting the minutes and wanting to hide your head in the crab cakes?

Whilst some people have a natural gift for 'working the room' many dread networking events and find them a lot more daunting and difficult than a normal day's work.

While I wouldn't pretend for a moment that one can turn the shyest of people into the most outgoing of individuals, it's reassuring to know that networking is a skill, and like all skills, can be improved with practice and a few tips.

Preparation

Most people go to a networking event and take it as it comes. You would be unlikely to go to a client meeting without any preparation because if you didn't know what you wanted to get from it, you would be unlikely to succeed. So it is with networking. A little preparation can pay big dividends.

Consider what you want to achieve and think about how many people you want to meet. It might help to do a bit of homework on the people that will be there. Think about what you will say when you introduce yourself. Remember to have to hand business cards, a pen, and a breath mint!

First Impressions

It may sound a cliché but first impressions do count. An initial impression can be made in the first 10 seconds. Check yourself in a mirror before entering the room. Once at the event, it's important to smile and make eye contact with the people in the room, and start to think of ice-breakers you can use to start conversation: the weather, the amount of people there, the crab cakes, almost anything to engage in dialogue. Although you might not want to strike up a controversial debate with a new business prospect as an opener!

People on their own may be a good bet to approach but beware – there may be a good reason why they're alone! Avoid two people in close conversation. A group of three or more can be a good option if you approach on the eyeline of the person leading the

conversation. Remember to use people's names. As soon as you learn someone's name (if they don't give it, politely ask for it - asking for it later in the conversation can be difficult), then use it in conversation. People do like to hear their own name! Give firm handshakes and introduce yourself by giving your name. *'Hello, I'm Carol Smith from Jack Smith Accountancy Services'*.

Build Rapport

Find common ground and don't underestimate small talk. This builds trust. Ask questions to show interest.

How far did you have to travel this evening?

What did you think of the speaker?

Have you tried one of those crab cakes? They're delicious

Ask opinions and value their point of view and try and use open questions to encourage full answers and closed questions to confirm understanding. Don't monopolize the conversation or finish other people's sentences as you won't want to be thought of as a bore!

One senior accountant I know goes to networking functions with the express aim of making quality contacts and the mainstay of her plan is to get the other person talking. She focuses on asking questions and being really interested in the other person. Some time ago, she told me why it was so successful for her.

1. She learned a lot about the other person.
2. She didn't have to do the talking which, if unsolicited, can be really boring for everyone except the person speaking.
3. The person doing the talking is having a good time and associates that with their conversation.

She had now started a new business relationship and, if part of her plan for the evening, somebody on her list to meet.

Don't stand too close to me

Also, don't forget to listen and do try and make eye contact throughout your conversation, but be careful to not give the impression you are ogling as this can be extremely unnerving for people you have only just met.

Do position yourself so that others can join the group and don't invade personal space. Female accountants have often remarked to me that they prefer more space from men they don't know!

Getting down to business

Have an answer prepared for the '...and what do you do?' question that will come up. Keep it short, but add detail. Describe the benefit a client could derive rather than just the feature of your job. For example *I'm an Associate with Jack Smith Accountancy Services and I help my clients keep their taxes to a minimum*. Sound committed to what you do and be prepared to give more information if people want it.

At any time in the conversation, business cards can be exchanged. If sooner in the dialogue, the card can be used as a talking point. If later, it shows a real interest in the person. Offer your card if they ask for it, and offer yours if you ask for theirs. If they don't have a card, take out two of yours, write their details on the back of one of yours and hand them the other. If they do have one, keep hold of it. Don't immediately put it in your pocket, as keeping it shows interest and will also help you remember their name.

Escape

Now you might want to think about moving on, remember there are potentially some great business opportunities lying out there, so it would be a shame just to stop at the first group. Thank the people you were talking to, say it was nice to talk to them, and move on to another group.

One Civil Servant accountant I worked with was so relieved when he found out how to make his escape easily. He had tried all the old chestnuts - 'got to dash for my train', 'the loo', 'top up my glass', none of them true when he used them and all therefore weak. Not good for building trust with the other person, especially when he was found talking to someone else shortly afterwards! There is only one way that works for you and the other person. Look them in the eye, say something along the lines of:

'It was really nice talking to you. I must move on. There are a couple of other people I want to talk to before I go. May I have your card? Is there anyone you would like me to introduce you to?'

Always ask for their card. In this way you are in control for following up. If you just offer then your card, the odds are that you will not hear from them again!

If you find making your excuses and moving on really difficult – and for some people, this is the most uncomfortable part of any meeting, think about working as a pair with a colleague. Even though you might feel this is a bit of a cop-out, you can still do it with honesty and it may well be a relief to the other person too who is in just the same quandary as you about to make the break! At a prearranged signal, your colleague approaches with an excuse for you to leave the group, saying, *'Would you excuse us? I must take 'Peter' to meet David Jones'*.

Follow-Up

After all that networking, it is really important to follow-up. If you don't all your efforts could be wasted. You might want to develop a system for recording your contacts and follow up within 48 hours and do consider writing a short, handwritten card or letter rather than an email. It has greater impact and looks more personal. Also share your contacts within your organization. If you share your contacts with the people you work with, they will do the same for you.

Remember, in networking, your aim is to leave the other person feeling really good about you and positive about doing business with you if the opportunity arises. And in the words of fellow networking expert Bob Burg "It isn't just what you know. It isn't just who you know. It's actually who you know, who knows you and what you do for a living."

Jack Downton is the managing director of The Influence Business Ltd (<http://www.TheInfluenceBusiness.com/>). He is a former colonel in the Royal Marines. Contact: Jack.Downton@TheInfluenceBusiness.com