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I'm a marketing exec – get me out of here!

By **Jack Downton**.

For a lot of people, networking sounds plain scary. It shouldn't. With a few helpful pointers, your next drinks reception can see you come away with a rolodex of new cards, and not just a hangover.

Why network? It's a question you're probably sick of hearing, particularly when you're not a fan of the hellish places where it usually goes on: awful company days out, summer BBQs, or even – whisper it - corporate drinks receptions.

But the need to influence people will never change, and it's all the more important during a recession when holding onto a client or poaching one from a rival might mean the survival of your business.

The bottom line is this: the only way to get somebody interested in you and your business is to make that person want to do it. Whilst there are various ways of doing this (a captivating smile, a gun to the head etc.), simply talking and listening to the other person is the best place to start when forging a working relationship.

For most of us, however, facing a roomful of strangers armed with nothing but a glass of mediocre white wine sounds about as appealing as being trapped in the Jungle with Ant and Dec. If eating cockroaches and performing all manner of weird rituals with C-list celebrities sounds preferable to you than hobnobbing with insurance brokers, then here are a few easy tips which you can immediately put into practice next time you're cornered by an actuary from Amersham.

Do your homework

A little preparation can go a long way to ensuring a successful evening. And just as you would with that important client brief, you should know what the deliverables of the event are for you: what do you want from the evening, who do you want talk to, and what would you most like to gain from that conversation? Above all: know who's going to be there before you walk through the door.

A winning opener

First things first; have a quick look in the mirror before you go through the door. You don't want to burst in straight from the office and strike up a conversation about the tennis, only to catch sight of yourself in the window and find you have Bridget Jones hair, there's a stray pickle on your jacket, or your flies are undone.

First impressions count, so make sure it's the right one. Think of something light to strike up a conversation, no management-speak (but don't try to sound too informal - remember, this is essentially a business meeting).

Think basic and then work on an opening line from there: the state of the traffic/tube, the difficulty of getting to wherever you are, that suspect glass of vino – the kind of thing that puts you on an immediate level platform with the rest of the room.

Aim to join the flow of conversation in larger, open-knit groups; a couple engaged in an intense conversation won't thank you for breaking up a potential business deal, and that guy at the back hovering by the water cooler might well be on his own for a good reason.

Laying the groundwork

A firm handshake and eye contact are the basics of a good 'hello' – remember, 90% of communication is non-verbal. Muttering your name whilst staring at the floor is not the best way to instill confidence or respect among your peers.

Get the other person's name and make sure you remember it – something I always try to do in this situation is to think of someone I know with that name, then compare those two people (try not to do this out loud though; 'Ah, I've got a mate called Dave – mind you he's still got most of his hair' will leave you standing on your own quicker than garlic breath).

Once you've established personal contact, make sure you stick on the right track; take a genuine interest in what the other person is saying, use their name to show you remember who they are, and don't dive straight in with a business card.

Aim to let the other person do most of the talking and you can achieve this by asking open questions and feeding off the answers. You've got to listen really carefully to make this work but it's the best way of showing you're interested. This should ensure they're left with a favorable impression of you when you do slip them that new card.

Don't take this as an opportunity to do nothing though; there's a difference between being an active listener who nods, maintains eye-contact, and laughs at someone's jokes rather than someone who stands next to you drawling 'yuh-huh' at regular intervals, sipping Pinot Grigio and staring out of the window.

Don't let the flow of conversation dry up however; if things suddenly get very quiet, don't be afraid to hit them with another 'opener'; in all likelihood, they'll feel just as uncomfortable as you, and if they see you as potentially an important contact, chances are they'll be just as keen to get the conversation started again.

Don't finish with a feeble 'Er, here's my card' and sidle off either; that's one sure-fire way to make sure your business card ends up in the bin. If you're interested in them, make sure you get their card. You're then in a position to follow up.

'And what do you do?'

The trick is not to sound like passport control when delivering this line – it should be spontaneous rather than formulaic. Remember, this is the whole point of the evening. If you're not going to take a genuine interest in what other people do, the entire gathering will have been one big waste of your time.

More importantly, when the inevitable rejoinder comes your way, make sure you have a pithy, punchy way of describing exactly what it is you do, coached in terms of benefits to them. It must be easy to remember and relate to. Don't alienate someone by giving a horrendously complex rundown of the latest deals, steal and snubs in your sector simply because they ask what that means; they're probably just looking for a few basic descriptors. .

Sealing the deal

Once you've established the basis of a potential working relationship (only in the subtlest possible way of course) which is mutually beneficial to both parties, then it's time to exchange details. It's a good idea to make sure your cards are fresh and up-to-date regularly, particularly before any big social season (summer parties, company BBQs etc).

Don't be tempted to thrust that new card straight into one of several deep pockets either; it looks dismissive, and it's a certain way to make sure you immediately forget that person's name. Instead, keep it in hand to confirm your interest in that person as an individual, not just another potential client. Just be careful not to end up juggling them if you're in a large group of people; and you don't want this to turn into an American Psycho-style competition to see who has the most stylish card.

Squeezing out

Odd as it may feel, the moment your conversation reaches fulfillment is the optimum moment to break it off. This might well be a short drinks reception, and there will be other interesting people waiting to talk to you if you know how to look for them. This is your time, and potentially your money, so spend it wisely.

This means breaking off your present conversation. Do this gently, however; 'Will you excuse me, I've just got to... erm... yeah....' will leave you looking both rude and stupid and ensure nobody in the vicinity will want to talk to you either, so come prepared with an exit line that sounds polite, timely and succinct.

When the dust settles

The crucial thing to do now is make sure all that hard time spent schmoozing isn't wasted; make a list of all of the potential clients you want to follow up with the next day, and get in touch straight away.

A call or a handwritten note will always look more personable than an email, and bear in mind how many that person will receive after events of this type (a good starting point is your own inbox the next morning).

But don't pin all your hopes on hundreds of new clients for the year ahead whilst letting your address book grow cold; organize regular follow up events for you and your existing clients (as well as other marketing events) to make sure you're retaining key business and keeping your finger on the trigger. What your competitors are doing is as important as what you're doing, so look to copy best practice wherever possible.

So at that drinks reception next week, walk in with a smile and a purpose; your business reputation depends on it.

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