

10 Success Tips for Reluctant Networkers (part 1)

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If you hate face-to-face networking, you're not alone. If the top-of-the-list most-feared activity is speaking in front of people, how can launching a conversation with a stranger be far behind?

I used to hate networking events, myself. I simply wouldn't go to them. Eventually someone dragged me to an event where lo and behold, I met a woman who became a great friend. After that, things got a little easier - but I'm still judicious about the events I choose to attend.

Networking with strangers can be lively and fun, or it can be a shoot-me-now experience. Here are some tips for easing the strain.

1. Choose Wisely.

If you're thinking of attending a face-to-face networking event and you're nervous about it, pick an event with content - a speaker or a panel. That way, you won't be forced to spend several hours networking without a net.

If you aren't a natural networker, you can prefer to attend events that feature structured networking of some kind. Structured networking activities organize the conversation so that attendees don't have to find their own conversation-mates and begin and end conversations organically - the event host sets up a networking activity that makes the conversation less stressful.

2. Bring a Friend

If you don't enjoy conversation with people you don't know, bring a friend (or two) to networking events with you. I perform this service for my friends all the time, and bringing a reluctant networker to an event with me raises my fun-quotient for the evening, as well as my friend's, because we can take a break and compare notes on the networking, the people and the food whenever we like.

For most of us, the least appealing networking situation is the one where we find ourselves in a room full of total strangers, who all seem to know and be cozy with one another. If you bring a friend with you, you'll never be the only newbie in the room.

3. Plan Ahead

If you want to do some networking but don't want to be overwhelmed, arrive when the networking portion of the event is halfway done. People will be chatting away, and you (and your friend) can join in a group conversation knowing that in twenty minutes, the speaker presentation will begin

There's no rule that says that once you've paid your registration fee, you have to attend the whole event. Make sure, of course, that you don't walk into the room in the middle of a speaker presentation or otherwise disrupt the meeting. That's one unfortunate way to be noticed!

4. Go for the Wallflower.

For people who don't like breaking into groups of avid talkers, my suggestion is to approach the most forlorn and lonely-looking person in the room, the person standing by him- or herself when you enter. That person may be a reluctant networker, too, and will undoubtedly be happy to have someone to talk to.

Don't put pressure on yourself to have X number of conversations or to collect a certain quantity of business cards. Fewer, richer conversations are better than lots of quick and forgettable ones.

5. Interview.

Not sure how to start a conversation? Think of your conversation-starter as a friendly, informal interview. "So, what brings you here this evening?" is pleasant. Keep your focus on your conversation partner, and additional questions will easily spring to mind. "Are you originally from here?" If you hate the dreaded "So, what do you do in your work?" you can spend half an hour learning about your acquaintance's life history, interests outside of work, favorite places to travel, and so much more. If a conversational spark develops, you can follow it wherever it leads.

Don't feel that you have to stick to business topics - they tend to be the most boring ones!

In our next installment, we will examine additional steps to ease the strain of networking.