



Take the “work” out of networking. Effective and fun networking techniques.

By Anne Scarlett, printed in *CE News* and the *AE Marketing Letter*

What do you call a crowded room, abuzz with banter and laughter, where relationships are created and deals are done? An opportunity or a daunting situation?

Picture the scenario. It’s the first night of an important three-day industry conference. You approach the door of the crowded ballroom full of strangers partaking in the opening gala reception. Your options: One: dash back to your hotel room, order room service, work on your laptop, all the while feeling guilty for missing out on opportunities to develop new professional relationships for the good of your company. Two: Take a deep breath and reflect upon the benefits of networking-- if you thought hard enough, you’d acknowledge that there is indeed much value to be shared. Or three: Having prepared yourself in advance, enter the room with confidence for a promising, fruitful evening.

It’s a trick question; your best bet is a combination of options two and three. Here are some ways to convert networking from ‘work’ into ‘fun’.

Do some sleuthing. As a participant of any networking event, you may be privy to the attendee list in advance — just ask the host directly. At a minimum, the host will share the company names of the attendees. Scan the list to see which firms your company is currently doing business with, which firms you’d like to do business with, and which firms might be good business partners or lead sources for future pursuits. If possible, consider calling a few in advance to express interest in a face-to-face introduction. Often, folks are receptive; try to set a quick 15-minute coffee rendezvous during the break.

Bone up on the topics. These attendees are in one place for a reason — folks are either interested in the content, or they are interested in meeting the folks who are interested in the content. Take time to do your own research on the topic and speaker(s) in order to form your own point of view. You needn’t be an expert on the topic. You simply need to have an initial opinion that you can support through examples, anecdotes, or sources.

Weave the web of connectivity. Connecting good people with good people is rewarding on multiple levels. Prior to the event, or in the moment while you are partaking, think about the attendees that you know there. Who might benefit from knowing whom? Who do you know in your network that might offer help to — or perhaps benefit from — the people you have met?

I learned this trick recently: Draw a circle. Put your name in the circle. Now, surrounding your circle, write the names of neat people that you know in professional (and personal) networks. Draw lines between the names that could benefit from one another. Could the president of your former firm benefit from knowing an expert in your current firm? Could the department head of civil engineering benefit from knowing a key vendor contact that you worked with in the past?

Networking is an ongoing process that requires an emphasis on serving as a conduit to create good connections. Over time, your efforts will be rewarded, perhaps in ways that you never imagined.

Practice your elevator speech. An elevator speech is the notion of effectively communicating your personal core message in 2 – 3 minutes — about the length of time that you might spend in an elevator.

The trick is to be a storyteller. People connect with — and are most likely to recall — a story. Consider this format: start your speech by identifying your target market and how you help them solve their problem(s); emphasize what makes you and your company unique in terms of its process and solution; finish with a short story that supports your claim.

Here is a paraphrased example of an elevator speech from a principal of an architectural firm in Chicago: *“My company provides municipalities with planning services for downtown revitalizations. These municipalities often face two key challenges: raising support from their community, and securing funds for the project. We go beyond simply providing our clients with a realistic master plan and highly contextual designs. We add value by helping our clients to craft their message, and we often participate in public hearings to pitch the project with clarity. As well, we get involved in our clients’ grant submissions by writing a compelling project description to define and endorse the project. Most recently, our client at the City of Springfield received the funding necessary for project kick off. They are so delighted with our upfront work that we were selected as their Master Architect, responsible for project oversight and for selecting appropriate firms for the execution of the master plan.”*

Rejuvenate yourself. Networking requires positive energy. Avoid burnout by taking time out to recharge. Before a lunchtime seminar, take a walk to clear your mind and get fresh air. During an out-of-town conference, create opportunities for relaxation. Treat yourself to a few chapters of a non-business related book. Indulge in a phone call back at your hotel room with a close family member or friend who will be glad to chat about fun things beyond business. Meditate in your room with a travel candle and calming music - though complete silence might be more appealing! Explore the town. And, for the dual purpose of rejuvenation and networking, go to the hotel health club and work out. Over the years, I’ve met some of my best networking contacts in fitness rooms!

Be mindful; the lasting benefits of networking are only truly successful when executed with sincerity — when you engage in full consideration of others’ interests. Try incorporating these ideas into your approach. As networking becomes easier — possibly even second nature — it will also become more fun!

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