

Tips for Networking as an Introvert

by Tiffany Waddell

Being an introvert does NOT mean you don't have social skills. However, it does mean that being around lots of people at one time can be draining. I am what you might consider an "expressive" introvert, so I am often mistaken for an extrovert. While both preferences have strengths and weaknesses, I love the fact that I am introspective—enjoy real conversations (read: no small talk)—and can still make connections in a myriad of contexts. Here are the top 10 networking tips that work for me:

Join the crowd. If people seem to be congregating in one area, join them and strike up a conversation.

Set reasonable expectations. When attending an event, prep yourself mentally for what you are there to do. Is your goal to meet more people? Is it to learn more about the organization's culture? Is it to meet one or two specific people? Make sure you set reasonable expectations beforehand, so that you have a goal in mind. It is a great way to keep you from getting overwhelmed, too.

Start a conversation with a loner. It's usually easier to start a conversation with someone who is standing alone, because they will most likely be happy to have someone to talk to—and as a result, are often more personable and easier to connect with.

Avoid barging into groups. A cluster of more than four people can be awkward—and tough to enter. Join the group on one side, but don't try to enter the conversation until you've made eye contact with each person at least one time. Usually, people will make room to add you to the "circle" of conversation, and you can introduce yourself then!

"Look mom, no hands!" Keep at least one hand free at all times! This means no eating and drinking at the same time if you are at a networking mixer or conference reception. This way, you can still shake hands with people without being awkward and fumbling around.

Be yourself. Networking events are meant as starting points for professional relationships. If you can't be yourself—and you aren't comfortable in your own skin, then the people you meet will be connecting with someone you're impersonating, and not the real you. Be genuine. Authenticity tends to attract much of the same.

Be present and engaged. Ever talked to someone that acts like you're the only person in the room? Someone who listens, and makes you feel like everything you are saying is important? I love those people! They really make you feel heard. Keep eye contact, and lean in or tilt your body towards people when you talk to them. Not in a creepy way, but in a, "I'm listening to you, and I'm fully present" kind of way.

Treat people like friends. Unless, of course, you are a terrible friend. Would you go to a friend and interrupt their conversation, hand over a business card, and walk away? No. Networking events are not transactions. Treat new people as you'd treat your friends—built rapport, be trustworthy, and then talk shop.

Follow the 72 hour rule. After a conference or networking event, you have about 72 hours to follow up with a person on LinkedIn or via e-mail. Reference something that you talked about and ask what the best way to stay connected might be. After 72 hours, they just might have forgotten you.

Practice makes perfect. Well, not really perfect. Progress is always better than perfection! The point here is that networking is a skill, like any other professional skill. It is a muscle that you have to develop and grow. While others may look like born networkers, they are more than likely just more experienced with it. Mistakes may happen, but the only way to learn is to get out there and do it!

Tiffany I. Waddell is an assistant director for career development at Davidson College.

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