Navigating your Way through Networking Events

Networking events and functions are fantastic ways to meet people and develop new contacts within your professional network. If you’re new to networking, these events can sometimes feel daunting, but with a few tips (below) and a little practice, you will be working the room with the best of them in no time at all.

Show up Early and Stay until the End

When you’re one of the first people to arrive at a networking event, you will be able to easily generate conversation with the few people present. As more gather, you are already in conversation with folks and can help bring others to join your group. Also, stay until the event is over. Considering that most people will either come to only the beginning or the end of such functions, you will get a chance to interact with a greater demographic.

Have Business Cards on Hand

Always bring your business cards to networking events so that you have them available for new contacts. However, in most settings, it is good practice to only hand out your business card when asked. If someone wants your information, they will request your card. If you want to follow up with a particular contact, request their card or information so that you have the information you need to cultivate further interaction.

First Impressions are Invaluable

When meeting people, be confident and introduce yourself clearly. Also, a firm handshake and a friendly smile go a long way in making a positive first impression. The first impression is often the one that sticks, so make it count.

Start with the End in Mind

If you are going to be effective in a networking function, you need to know why you are there. Are you there to develop new job leads? Are you seeking to connect with people within a particular industry? Are you simply seeking to expand your network and meet new people? Knowing why you are there will equip you to focus your activity on this goal and leave the event with the connections you seek.
Prepare Questions

When talking with individuals, ask questions about them rather than talking about yourself the entire time. Be SINCERELY interested in the other person and use active listening skills.

Here is a list of questions that can be used as “others-focused” conversation starters:

- Tell me about yourself.
- How did you decide to go in to this business?
- What do you most enjoy about what you do?
- What are your future career or business pursuits?
- What current challenges do you face in your business or career?
- How is (some current event) impacting your industry/business right now?

Go for Quality, not Quantity

When attending a networking event, think quality, not quantity. For example, instead of trying to get around to as many people as you can, your goal might be to generate five solid new connections. This allows you to focus your time, and not feel the pressure of meeting everyone in attendance. If you spend quality time developing genuine connections, the fruit of your networking activity will be more long-lasting than if would be if you try to “conquer” the room.

Follow-Up is Key

Your follow-up to the event is just as important, if not more important, than the event itself. To capitalize on the contacts made, be sure to take notes to help you recall conversations and follow up (via email or a handwritten note) with each person you met. If you offered a service, connection, or resource in your conversation, be sure to follow through.

Practice Often

We all know that “practice makes perfect.” Networking is a learned skill that you will refine and develop with practice. Make it a habit to attend networking events so that you can become more confident in your ability to interact in these settings and learn to articulate your career interests and pursuits effectively.