Networking—a fancy way of saying getting to know people—is an important part of business. At general events, it is one of the most effective ways to gain new clients and customers and increase your business revenues. Networking at industry affairs is an excellent way to meet others who work in your field. You can even use networking concepts within your own organization, to get to know folks you do not work with on a day-to-day basis. If you are among the many people—including myself—who say they plan to increase their networking efforts this year, here are a few basic networking etiquette tips to achieving the optimum results from your efforts.

BEFORE THE EVENT

Plan Ahead. Pick out what you plan to wear at least 24-48 hours ahead of time, so you won’t get caught only having dirty clothes in the closet. Set aside all you will need for the event, including a copy of the invitation, directions to get there, and a pen and pad for notes. Most importantly make sure you have an ample supply of business cards to give people you meet. Even when unemployed or a student you can print your own cards with basic information on it… Name, Telephone, Email Address, plus a title or one line description of the position you are seeking.

AT THE EVENT

Arrive on time. Before entering the event, preview the guest list or the display of pre-printed name tags to target two to three people to meet during the event.

Introduce yourself. Be brave, most people will appreciate that you’ve taken the initiative to speak to them. I recommend always introducing yourself with both your first and last name, company affiliation without any titles or honorifics, and a smile. It amazes me so many people still introduce themselves with just their first name and no company affiliation, as if they are still five years old at a friend’s birthday party!

Extend your hand for a firm and friendly handshake. When it comes to shaking hands, I believe in the law of the draw in the Old West…whoever extends their hand first is the winner. It should be you, regardless of being a man or woman. Always push your hand in all the way to meet web-to-web, with your fingers together and your palm straight out and thumb up. Never give a finger tip hold or short handshake which is commonly just squeezing the other person’s hand short of meeting web-to-web. Remember a good handshake is completed by shaking a woman’s hand no differently than a man’s hand. There are no double standards in business.

Rehearse your introduction. Plan the best way to briefly describe yourself and the products and services you provide, from a benefit-and-results basis. Avoid long, technical descriptions that simply tell the person boring facts as well as the sales pitch approach. Instead, make the tone a friendly yet informative conversation.

Make business card exchanges meaningful. The “speed dating” days are over when networking amounted to saying, “Hello, my name is Jane Smith, have a card.” Instead, only exchange cards with someone when it will be of benefit to both of you. There are two basic reasons to give someone your card: when the other person asks for one or when you offer something they want and you invite them to follow-up with you. After giving them a card, you may ask for their contact information.
Enter group conversations sensitively.
When entering a group, approach and stand quietly for a second or two. Wait for a break in the conversation or for someone in the group to look your way. If no one looks in your direction and everyone continues the conversation without any break or glance in your direction, exit immediately with “excuse me.” It is apparent they are in a heavy conversation, not choosing to invite anyone else into the conversation.

Exit conversations politely. Even if you are face-to-face with someone you’ve wanted to meet at this event, avoid monopolizing their time. Keep your time from being monopolized by someone else, as well. After a reasonable time, exchanging some meaningful information, comfortably move from the conversation by saying, “Please excuse me, I’ve enjoyed speaking with you.” Then smile and move on.

Introduce yourself to tablemates. When being seated at a large table, go around the table to introduce yourself before taking a seat. Choose a seat on the opposite side of the person(s) you’ve just met, leaving seats on either side of you vacant, to be filled by other arriving guests. This way you will comfortably meet everyone at the table.

AFTER THE EVENT
Follow-up. The key to successful networking is to show you are interested in the people you meet. For the most impact, sending a personal handwritten note—by regular mail, within 24 to 48 hours—to every person you met and reconnected with at a networking opportunity is the best. Emailing and placing a personal telephone call is also appropriate, including writing or calling someone who has helped give you leads and referrals. Be sure to fulfill any promises you made to people you’ve met.

Get permission before sharing contact information. Check-in with someone before you share their contact information, even when you think you are doing someone a great favor. In instances where I have gained overall permission to share someone’s information, I send both parties an email, stating: “By copy this message to both of you, I am referring Jane Doe to John Smith, in hopes you two may be of service to each other by…” Then I include full contact information on both people. This way everyone is fully informed of the situation.

Additional information on related topics:
--- Online Discussion Group Networking Etiquette Do’s and Don’ts... See http://www.quintcareers.com/online_networking-dos-donts.html.

--- “Etiquette for LinkedIn and the Professional Networking World”... See http://www.intuitive.com/blog/etiquette_for_linkedin_and_the_professional_networking_world.html

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