

How to Maximize your Opportunity to Work a Room

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There are not many things which are more intimidating than walking into a room filled with people, none of whom you know and all of who seem to know one another. Although there is no easy solution to alleviate the anxieties that most of us feel when subjected to this kind of situation, there are a few basic strategies that make the task of "working" the room so much easier. Consider the following suggestions:

Setting Objectives

Before walking in, consider carefully in your mind (or even on paper) your objectives for the event, and if you have more than one objective, prioritize them. This is a critical first step which so many of us ignore or avoid, but unless you know your objectives, your chances of achieving them are pretty slim. Examples of objectives can be: I want to meet 7 new people or I hope to meet people in a position to send me business.

Determination of Audience

Select your audience carefully. For example, if you are a young lawyer, going to a networking event with senior executives may be quite daunting and your chances of success (and achieving your goals) are diminished. At least at the beginning, while you are honing your networking skills, if you choose an event where you expect like-minded and/or like-aged people, you will likely find your experience to be easier to manage. Once you have built up your confidence, you can tackle loftier goals.

Identification of Targets

Look for people who are standing alone and go and talk to them – believe it or not, there are likely a number of people in the room who are feeling even more ill at ease than you – take the initiative - they are likely to respond with gratitude. Most people attending a networking event are there to network so if you can start up a conversation with someone standing alone, you are helping him/her achieve his/her objectives too – a happy customer!

The "Elevator Speech"

Develop in advance (and perhaps even commit it to paper and rehearse) a brief, effective introduction – an elevator speech. Instead of simply saying "hi, my name is... and I am a lawyer working with ... in ...," consider how to make your introduction one which will provoke interest by the person who you are talking to. Perhaps *"my name is ...and as a lawyer I help clients buy and sell businesses."* or *"I help people resolve disputes, sometimes through the courts but more often by settling them."* You should try to customize your introduction to your target audience. For example, your elevator speech in a room full of international lawyers should be different from your elevator speech for accountants or potential clients.

The Importance of Listening

Try to focus on listening rather than talking. Although it is our tendency to want to talk as much as possible to show how smart and/or capable we are, people often leave a conversation with a positive feeling if they feel that they have been listened to and their points of view/needs have been understood. Accordingly, you should spend as much time as possible (more than half) asking questions about that person and his/her business. Once you have introduced yourself, you should immediately flip the conversation around and say *"what about you?"* People love to talk about themselves, and you will likely not only learn something about them but also build trust.

Commonality of Interests

Try to find at least a couple of things in common with the person with whom you are talking – look for mutual acquaintances, hobbies, children, places traveled, etc.

Two is Not Better Than One

Split up with colleagues and friends and circulate in the room – about the worse thing that you could do is clearly the easiest – walk into the room with a colleague or friend and spend most of the evening talking to him or her. It's very hard to meet someone if you are standing and talking to someone else. If you do walk in with a colleague or friend, make a point of splitting up and each endeavouring to meet as many people as possible. You can compare notes afterwards!

Resist the Urge to Scan the Room

Look the person to whom you are talking straight in the eye – sorry, it's so basic, but so important. We are all tempted at cocktail parties to glance around and see who else may be wandering by, but by doing so, you are signaling disinterest. It takes concentration, and more than a little willpower, but keep absolutely focused on the person with whom you are talking. People who have met President Bill Clinton in person have said that he is incredibly charming and focused. One of his secrets is that he makes you feel that you are the only person in the room. If it can work for Bill Clinton – it should be able to work for you!

How to End the Conversation

One of the most difficult things to do is to break off a conversation after a few minutes, in order to circulate. You want to make the break in the conversation in a way which is natural. You could say *"I have really enjoyed talking with you but I don't want to take up all of your time as I am sure there are others in the room who you would also like to get to know"*. You might add *"I hope we have a chance to chat again soon"* or (and only if you really mean it) *"I would like to have the opportunity to spend more time with you – why don't I call you for lunch next week."* You could also try *"This has been really interesting, could I have your card?"*

Another option is to break the conversation in order to go to the bar or to get something to eat. To this end, when you go to the bar, think about asking for only a half a glass and if you go to the buffet table, put one thing only on your plate. As well, the bar or buffet table

can be a great place to meet people who are standing alone. If you focus on the food and drink rather than on meeting people, you will likely not achieve all of your objectives. Coming to a networking event with a full stomach will allow you to focus on meeting people.

Introductions to Others

If you have met two people, introduce them to one another – you may well be doing them a favor, through broadening their circle of contacts and this can also be a great disengagement strategy, because you are now able to leave these two talking to one another.

The Importance of Follow-Up

Keep track of the people you have met. You may want to write notes about them on their card immediately after the event (or, discreetly, during it). Follow-up with new contacts. When you meet people with whom you would like to develop a relationship, call those people within a week or two after you meet, or drop them a note to tell them that you enjoyed meeting them and why. To help them remember you, you might remind them of what you discussed and you might send them some information that you think they would find to be useful or interesting – this could be as "unbusiness" as information about a place where you took a holiday which you discussed during your conversation, the title and author of a book which you read and which you think they would find to be of interest or a restaurant that you ate at recently that you think they might enjoy. This kind of follow-up is essential to establishing a relationship – the recipient will not only appreciate your thoughtfulness, but you will stand out from the others that he or she met on this occasion. Stay in touch – don't let a potentially interesting contact slide away through lack of attention – have a regular follow-up procedure and an action plan to ensure that you keep in touch on a periodic basis.

The Fear of Rejection

Most of us suffer from a fear of rejection, which often inhibits our ability to work a room effectively. The best way to overcome this tendency is a combination of using some of

the techniques referred to above together with experience – if, when you leave that room, you feel that you have done a good job of meeting the objectives which you established in advance, have met several interesting people and have presented yourself well, going into that room of strangers the next time is bound to be significantly easier.

Alternative Approaches

If after several experiences working a room you are still uncomfortable, seek out and accept a speaking opportunity in conjunction with a networking event. Being a speaker either before or after the networking event will increase your profile among attendees and boost your confidence. You may even find that some people approach you because they have either heard you speak or are going to hear you speak and have questions or comments for you.

If you have any additional questions, please don't hesitate to contact either of us:

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