

The Top Eight Rules of Networking

By Kelly Eggers



You know the type. The people with obnoxious laughs, pushy pitches, and the ability to corner you at industry conferences and talk about themselves continuously for what seems like hours? The ones who clearly mean well, but their lack of etiquette can make you wish you hadn't even gone?

Here's a friendly suggestion: Don't be that person.

Networking is a critical part of any job hunt, yet it's probably the easiest thing to get wrong. Using living, breathing connections works better than blindly sending out resumes over the Internet, but for many, approaching people they don't know for help finding or getting a job is uncomfortable and nerve wracking.

Knowing a few etiquette guidelines can help you keep your conduct aboveboard, and perhaps ease a few fears about putting yourself in front of the well-connected.

Have a Solid Introduction

As most know, first impressions count heavily. Make sure your attire, attitude and overall appearance are the best possible before introducing yourself to someone.

If you're at a networking event, pay close attention to the groups people have formed around the room. Join people who are by themselves, or a group of two or three whose positions provide you with a physical "opening" to jump into the conversation, says Ivan Misner, founder of California-based business networking organization BNI.

Introduce yourself by clearly stating your name and making eye contact while you shake their hand, says Carol Goman, a nonverbal communication expert and author of *The Silent Language of Leaders*. Weak handshakes turn people off, so practice yours with a friend to make sure it's neither bone-crushing nor wimpy.

If introducing yourself online, remember to follow in-person social etiquette rules. If someone referred you to the person, for example, put the mutual contact's name in the subject line of the e-mail, says Goman, so there's an immediate level of recognition. "Email is a cold medium," she says. "If you can warm it up with something personal, do so."

Don't Confuse People with Your Pitch

No one needs to hear your entire work history upon meeting you. If someone asks you to tell them a bit about yourself, your explanation from start to finish shouldn't take more than 30 to 60 seconds.

This is especially true when you're networking with people who don't work in your industry. Going into the nitty gritty details of your specific skills and interests in chemical engineering will likely go over the head of someone who works in management consulting or marketing. "Most people begin by reciting their resume in reverse chronological order," says Jodi Glickman, author of *Great on the Job*, and founder of the career consultancy by the same name.

"Instead, you should start with what you want to do -- your destination -- then a brief backstory, and connect the dots between them," says Glickman. Share what's relevant, not what's recent. "The latest thing you've been working on might not be related to what you want to do next."

Don't Tell a Sob Story

No matter how tough it's been, you need to paint a positive picture when you're making new connections. "Potential employers or connections aren't going to bring on people who are down in the dumps just to make them feel better," says Glickman. They want people who project a good, can-do attitude, and who will be energetic and excited about the position, she says, not people who are just excited to have a job.



Complaining in general has no place in networking – whether it's about unemployment, how tough your job is, or how bad your former employer was. "In this economy, people say 'How's business?' and they'll actually tell you," says Misner. "It doesn't do any good to complain about how bad business or the economy is. People hate doing business with people who are grumpy."

Spend More Time Listening Than Talking

In this case, the old adage is true: People were given two ears and one mouth, and you should use them proportionately. "Just like in the dating world, you should spend more time listening to and understanding the person in front of you than talking about yourself," says Mark Jeffries, a business communications consultant and author of *What's Up With Your Handshake?*. "Once you have truly understood what drives this person, then you can introduce yourself and tell your own stories in a way that best fits their specific needs."

"Most people think that the really great networkers are extroverts, but extroverts don't shut up," says Misner. Talking about yourself is a good way to spread the word about who you are, but listening closely can help you form a deeper relationship with someone.

Avoid Being Socially Inept

There's a fine line between being friendly and personable and being awkward. You do not want to be the latter.

"Steer clear of talking about things that would make people uncomfortable," says Glickman.

"For example, don't tell me that you were out of work for six months because you recently had brain surgery, or because you were laid off."



People are going to feel as if they need to pity you, but you don't want that to be the foundation of a relationship. Being vague about negatives – like saying you're returning after a six-month medical leave, or after spending some time traveling – is a good way to keep the conversation on a high level.

You should maintain some normal social constructs, such as where you direct your eyes and how closely you stand to people.

Looking from someone's eyes to the middle of their forehead is professional, versus a more social gaze of eyes-to-mouth, says Goman. You should also try to keep an arm's length away from anyone you're talking to, says Misner.

Don't Overstay Your Welcome

Taking up too much of someone's time is almost as bad as ignoring them entirely.

"It's imperative that you understand when your time is up," says Jeffries. "You win in the social world if you 'release people first,' so if you see a slow crossing of the arms, an increase in the amount of time they're looking over your shoulder, or a sudden obsession with the word 'anyway,' they are giving you not-so-subtle hints that they'd like to move on."

Have a few "graceful exits" ready, says Goman. Examples: "It was a pleasure meeting you! There are a couple of other people here who I said I'd get it touch with while I'm here," or "Is there anyone here I can introduce you to?" If you're still lost, there's always the standby "I'm going to run to grab another drink."

Hand out Your Business Card, Not Your Resume

It's not ok to pass along an unsolicited resume. Offline or online, you need to work on forming a relationship with someone before you ask them for anything at all. Many people overlook this professional courtesy, and ask brand new connections to serve as a referral when submitting a resume or application.

"Don't ask strangers for a job," says Glickman. "You can't ask someone to do a favor for you who you don't have a relationship with. It's unprofessional, tacky and ineffective."



Instead, go for the business card exchange. Make sure that when you offer yours, you specifically and politely request theirs. Don't assume they'll solicit it on their own. Once you're a bit of a distance from them, take a minute to jot down a few notes about the person you just met on a sheet of paper – anything personal they may have mentioned, a news item you discussed, or a business idea you talked about. You can use that to politely jog their memory in a follow-up note.

Follow Up and Through

Perhaps the "Cardinal Rule" of networking is that once you've planted the seeds of a new relationship, you must follow up to maintain it. Whether it's a business referral, job lead, or a professional connection, get in touch – within 24 hours – to say you enjoyed meeting them.

"No one owes you anything, so you need to be as ingratiating as you can," says Glickman. People who have taken the time to speak with you and provide you with connections or guidance deserve a thank you. "Assume that you can learn from everyone. They might not be the right person, but they might know someone who you might want to be in touch with."

It's also critical to reach out to anyone a connection refers you to. "People hate it when they give someone a referral and the person never bothers to follow up on it," says Misner. If you don't, it makes two parties look bad, he says – you, since you didn't follow through on a potential lead, and the person who referred you, since they recommended you as a reliable resource.