

Simple Ways to Network, Even If You're Shy

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Often people believe networking is perfecting your elevator pitch and handing out as many business cards as possible. But this can easily feel awkward, or even dated. So, the question is, how do you network effectively in an organic way? We asked the pros for their advice on becoming a skilled networker. And some of what they had to say might surprise you.

First, reach out to people from your past.

When we're in networking mode, we tend to think about the future and forget about those who helped us get to where we are now. But reconnecting with old coworkers, bosses, mentors, and former coaches is key. They're likely in a different place in their careers and have made new connections that you can also tap into.

Although sending an email to someone who haven't spoken to in seven years can feel forced, don't be deterred. "Trust that people will be delighted to hear from you," Dr. Joelle Jay, Ph.D, Executive Coach at Tone Networks, an online platform for women, says. "Remind them of how you know each other in your note, and in no time, you will have recreated a personal connection."

Contact your alumni network.

Speaking of your past, don't forget about your alumni organization. "Most alumni networks have events and volunteer activities that are perfect for expanding your rolodex," says CEO and Founder of Tone Networks, Gemma Toner.

Why? At an alumni meet-up you'll at least share one thing in common: where you went to school. Use this as a way to bond, and professional opportunities will likely follow.

Do your research before networking events.

First, to find a networking event, you can check LinkedIn, which has an events section listed right on your personal homepage. There you can find happenings near you in a field you're interested in. Or, Eventbrite offers a similar service.

Once you've settled on an event, do your homework. "Check out who is attending," advises Sharon Melnick, author of *Confidence When it Counts: Rise Above Self Criticism and Bias to Make Your Mark*. You can do this by following the hashtag thread on social media to see who is posting about the event, reaching out to the organizer in advance, and sometimes the invitation platform (e.g., Eventbrite, Paperless Post) will share the RSVP list (without contact info). "Once you know the attendees, "identify who you might have synergy with and who could be particularly helpful to your business or career," she says.

Then, make conversation at coat check.

At networking events, you might think to schmooze around the room. But, it's the unexpected places where you can make the most meaningful connections. For example, the elevator leading to the event, the coat check and the drink line all offer perfect opportunities to ask "What brings you here tonight?" says Melnick.

Try giving a compliment as an ice-breaker.

Once you have the moment, Melnick suggests starting your chat with a compliment. "If there is something immediately noticeable about the person then feel free to shine that positivity on them by saying 'I love your jacket, I had to come over and find out where you got it,' for example. Be someone who raises the energy of other people around you," she says.

Other valuable tips? Hold your drink in your left hand to leave your right available for shaking. Also, ask an open-ended question that engages meaningful conversation (e.g., what brings you here tonight as opposed to starting with what do you do), and on your way home, jot down a few notes about your conversation with each of the people you connected with to facilitate your follow up.

Join hobby groups.

Professional organizations are a given. But, it's also important to join groups that share personal passions, says Val Grub, a career coach at TONE

Networks. For example, by joining a book club, "You'll immediately have a common interest and connect with people on a real level."

An easy way to do this is by looking on Meetup.com, which is the world's largest network of local groups. Simply search your interest (e.g., knitting) in your location. Or, a simple Google search like "poetry clubs in Manhattan," will also yield useful results. Even joining a gym can be a way to meet people if you're into fitness.

Always follow up.

Let's be real: networking events can be incredibly overstimulating. It's easy to get lost in the clutter, and rarely do you get the kind of quality time with someone at an event that'll make a lasting impression. That's why the follow up after the event is more beneficial.

If you've had a great exchange, ask the person the best way to stay in touch. Some people like email or phone; others prefer Instagram or LinkedIn. Message them within 48 hours of the event to show you're interested and available and reference something you discussed so that your contact remembers you, suggests Jennifer Fleiss CEO & Co-Founder of Jetblack and Rent the Runway.

In your follow up email, remind the person of a memorable moment of your conversation so they can quickly recall your exchange. Tell them what it was that stood out for you about them and give them that compliment.

"Approach the follow up with a specific insight or ask to show you are both mindful and respectful of that person's time," says Fleiss. "Never send an 'I'd like to join your network' or 'will you be my mentor' note, as it lacks the action-oriented drive that will make you stand out." Instead, propose a next step, e.g., invite them to meet again.

Consider starting a podcast.

A podcast will elevate your online presence, says Manning, thus making it easier for people to find *you*. Websites like Anchor allow you to record, and

edit a podcast on your phone, for free. They'll even help you to secure sponsors.

Additionally, podcast hosts are always looking for other experts to share their insights. Often a host will invite you to contribute to their platform with the agreement you will allow them to be featured on yours. “This is a great way to increase your network and build a community,” adds Manning. “When creating content, make sure that you are developing it for a specific target in mind. You want your platforms to specific to your field and provide value to all those involved.”

Be strategically active on LinkedIn.

“Spend 15 minutes every morning liking and commenting on colleagues' posts,” says Toner. “Also try to share relevant articles and news at least once a week This keeps you popping up in searches and top of mind when people are perusing the site.”

Another tip? Career coach Pat Roque suggests using the LinkedIn App, and it's "Find Nearby" feature to connect with people around you at conferences and events in your proximity.

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