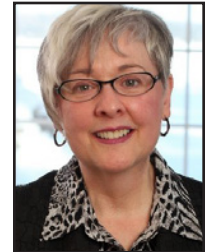


Feature

Ten Strategies on How to Work a Room

Time for a networking refresher

Business mixers, fundraisers or cocktail hours provide prime opportunities to meet new people. However, in my research, less than 5% of people actually enjoy these events because of fears of getting in and out of groups and striking up conversations with strangers. Here are a few tips on how to work a room and improve your networking experience. As you put them into practice, you will see how much easier it is to attend events that are teeming with interesting people and opportunities.



Catherine
Graham Bell
AICI CIP
President,
PRIME Impressions

1. Recognize that nervousness is natural

From a young age, we are told not to talk to strangers, so entering a room filled with them is uncomfortable. Look for the common thread you may have. For instance, at a fundraiser you may have similar interests in supporting the charity. At a business mixer, you can assume that everyone there is interested in further developing their business. With this awareness, the people you are about to meet are not so strange after all.

2. Be prepared

Research who will be there, set a goal to meet three to five new people, bring lots of business cards, have three to five timely topics to use in conversation, such as positive current events, and use positive self-talk as you get ready.

3. Eat before you go

A mixer is not an opportunity to eat dinner — its prime purpose is to network and search for future business opportunities. If you are hungry, eat something ahead of time. Learn how to balance a drink, hors d'oeuvres plate and a napkin in your left hand, keeping your right hand free for shaking hands.

4. Dress with impact

Decide whether you want to be powerful or approachable and then plan your clothing strategy. If the event is casual, don't dress down too far, remembering that your professional image is tied to minute details. Always dress at the same level or above your competition, but in sync with the clients you hope to connect with.

5. Make a deliberate entrance

Walk with purpose and go at least a quarter of the way into the room. As you survey the crowd, others will be absorbed in conversation, giving you a few minutes to decide what to do next.

6. Approaching people

Go up to a person who is standing on their own or a group of more than two. Two people may resent your intrusion and most individuals standing alone are thrilled to have someone with whom to talk. Look for open circles that have a space for you to fill and try and get eye contact with someone to draw you in.

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7. Become a host and break the ice

Introduce yourself using a short self-introduction statement that focuses on the benefits you bring to clients rather than what you do. Ask for others' business cards and be ready to give them yours but don't force it on them.

8. Initiate small talk

If conversing with strangers does not come easily, the stress of "making conversation" will disappear when you concentrate on asking others about themselves. People always enjoy talking about their work, interests and concerns, while you play the role of the attentive listener. Consequently, they will come away from the experience with a positive feeling associated with meeting you. If conversation seems to be slowing down, "Please tell me more" can give you a few minutes to think of another topic to broach.



9. Focus on contacts, not contracts

Your focus at a business mixer is not to get to know people well, but to make contacts that can be followed up at a later date. It is usually impossible to try and conduct business at such events.

10. Break away graciously and continue to network

To continue to meet your goal to meet new people, after about ten minutes, you need to break away. While you are talking, start to summarize the conversation you've had and that you found it interesting, and then say something like, "I'm sure there are others here you'd like to meet." If they say yes, continue with, "I look forward to seeing you next time," or "Enjoy the rest of the event." If you've been speaking to someone on their own and the person appears to be concerned about being released into the crowd, take them with you to meet others.

When you return to your office, immediately review the business cards you collected and make notes. If you want to develop a business relationship further, contact them to arrange a meeting to find out more about their organization. Send these new contacts a note or e-mail saying that you enjoyed meeting them so that you are top of mind when future business opportunities arise.

Catherine Graham Bell, AICI CIP, is President of PRIME Impressions, author of EMPOWER YOUR PRESENCE: How to Build True Wealth with Your Personal Brand and Image and Managing Your Image Potential: Creating Good Impressions in Business, a dynamic international trainer and one of only 12 Certified Image Professionals in Canada. She can be reached at catherine@prime-impressions.com.