

Exhibit and Event Management Networking For People Who Don't

By: *Lori Amundsen, An Ideal Partner, LLC and
Bob Thomas CME, Exhibit and Event Management*

Networking...it can initiate a friendship, a lower price, a new client, a new job, or the final piece of a puzzle you've been struggling with for years. We all network to differing degrees - some appear to come by it naturally, while others are intimidated by a roomful of people and may look for a social butterfly to help them along.

If you're uncomfortable in a roomful of strangers, fear not. Most "natural" networkers have simply found a way to be comfortable in the situation. With a few tools, and the right mindset, you can also develop a networking process that's comfortable – and will increase your professional and personal success.

Networking often starts with a casual conversation, a business card swap, or a simple introduction. It can happen anywhere - the airport, at your kid's soccer game, on the show floor, or at a more formal networking event like a reception or dinner. Have you ever been at a party (where you don't know all of the guests) and in the course of conversation, learn about a new restaurant? If so, you've experienced successful networking!

Why then is it so difficult to accomplish the same thing in a roomful of business associates? Maybe you expect to see some people there and can't find them. Maybe it's difficult because it's an obligation, and not a personal choice. Whatever the reason, you need to talk to someone...quick!

Look around and find someone else who's standing by themselves and looking around! Their body language says they're open to conversation. Wander over to their area of the room and say hello! If you're afraid of being obvious, find someone near the food table! You're bound to be in a position to say hello without looking obvious. If the person starts talking to someone else in the meantime, you can dive into the food until the next "open" person appears!

Look at networking as an *opportunity to help someone else feel comfortable* in the situation...focus on solving someone else's problem. It's a great way to distract yourself from your own stress of being alone.

It also helps to recognize that networking in a business environment isn't personal. You're not looking for a life-long soul mate, and neither is anyone else. You're looking for useful resources and contacts in your chosen industry. The strangers in the room are there for the same reason. It's much easier to start a conversation, or keep it going, by focusing your conversation on professional challenges that may be better solved with brainstorming amongst your peers.

For instance, your “challenge” could be as simple as exhibiting in an unfamiliar city. Is there someone that could tell you where the closest office supply store is, or the best Mexican restaurant, or someone who knows the nuances of working with the local labor force? I’ll bet there is.

Everyone wants to feel needed. Even if you’re perfectly capable of solving a problem on your own, you may come up with a better solution if you allow others to share their experiences – and it makes for a great way to help others feel needed and keep a conversation going.

However, it’s best to expect at the outset that there’ll be a time during the event you’ll be standing there with no one to talk to. If you expect it going in, this alone can reduce the stress of being in a roomful of strangers. It also allows you to prepare for the situation.

Make some time before you go to relax and rejuvenate. Take a shower, read a book or magazine, go for a run, soak your feet in cold water or do something that otherwise freshens your spirit - even if it’s only for ten minutes. You’ll handle the stress much better if you feel rejuvenated.

Next, think about your current work situation as it relates to the people you’re about to meet. What are those “challenges” you’re facing that might be better solved with some input from others? If you have one to three topics in the forefront of your mind (no more than three), it will be a great deal easier to start a conversation when you find yourself with no one to talk to.

Remember that even “natural” networkers aren’t comfortable alone in a roomful of strangers. They’ve just decided to focus on things other than themselves to make the situation more comfortable. You too can find this comfort zone following the process outlined above. In fact, you may find networking isn’t a big deal at all!

Don’t neglect the opportunity to make a stranger feel more comfortable. In doing so, you will gather useful information for yourself, help others feel included and gain confidence in your ability to “work a room” – experiencing greater professional and personal success.

Bob Thomas, CME is Founder and President of Exhibit and Event Management – an exhibit management and consulting company based in Columbus Ohio. He is also Past Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Trade Show Exhibitors Association and has been managing trade show and marketing exhibits for more than 15 years.

Bob Thomas, CME
Exhibit and Event Management
3227 Mountview Road
Columbus OH 43221
614.538.9004 office
877.299.5836 toll free
614.538.9019 fax
www.exhibitmanagement.com

Simple Steps To “Work A Room”:

- Look happy and interested so others will approach you (and look for the same body language in others)
- Say hello! (View it as a way to make *someone else* feel more comfortable in a room full of strangers.)
- Set realistic expectations. Even in a room of 1,000 people at an event lasting 2 hours, you’ve done GREAT to have 3 people added to your list of contacts.
- Find a way to remember names and use them in your conversation
- Always carry plenty of business cards and a pen - and think about where you will put collected cards vs. your own
- Write short notes on the back of business cards as soon as you can to remember details or follow-through discussed
- Focus your conversations on one to three “challenges” you’re currently facing
- Keep those most useful to you involved in the conversation
- Move on if the person doesn’t seem open or friendly. There are plenty of people in the room who would welcome a greeting from a stranger!
- Follow through on the conversations requiring action. It’s a great way to keep new relationships fresh...and to know more people at the next event.