

Networking Tips for Introverts

By Janki DePalma, LEED AP, CPSM

AS an extrovert, I have a secret to share – I am jealous of introverts! That is because I am surrounded by them daily, and I know their superpowers: an ability to listen well and to engage in thoughtful conversations.

But like every superhero, introverts, too, have their kryptonite – networking events. Networking is an essential part of career development. Essentially, people like to work with people they know, like, and trust.

So, as an extrovert who is thrilled about the benefits of networking, I would like to share some insight into how you, as an introvert, can wield your superpowers to conquer the intimidating yet important realm of networking.

Here's the thing. Most introverts are uncomfortable because they think they need to network like an extrovert. Just. Don't.

When we think of the “ideal networker,” we often see this gregarious person passing business cards and holding court with throngs of people. When you try to be this person, it fails. You are not this person, and that is ok. In fact, I would argue that it is a good thing! My full-time job is building relationships and teaching engineers how to create and develop their professional network. If you have ever wished you had a secret memo on how to maneuver a networking event, here it is! These tips, combined with your natural powers of listening and developing deeper relationships, can make networking so much easier.

How do I approach people? Walking up to a group of strangers with a charming opening line is a lot of pressure. I usually approach a group of three or more people. I stay away from couples or any solo person hovering over his phone. Odds are 3+ people are not having a private conversation. My go-to “line” is direct. “Hey, you guys seem friendly, mind if I join you?”

Usually, in a group of 3 or more, there will be one person you can make eye contact with. Focus your opening line to this person. Also, when you tell someone they seem friendly, it forces them to live up to your expectation.

Now what do I say? We all hate small talk! Let's all agree to stop talking about the weather or traffic. I start with some context questions. Something like, “So, how do you guys know the host?” or “which conference sessions did you like?” This helps you establish some

common ground. When you are first meeting people, it is great to find some commonalities – the threads that bind you. This takes you from a complete stranger to less of a stranger. The “so am I” commonalities help connect you quicker.

Should I talk about my work? Making a connection involves charisma, a connection with people through both your warmth and your intelligence. Veer too much into a technical mode, you never really break the surface to a genuine connection.

An easy way to connect is to ask questions about someone's personal interest. Remember, people like to talk about themselves, and you can use your introverted “great listening skills.” This hands-down is where the introvert shines! Ask a few questions and let the other person go.

What kind of questions do I ask? I have two go-to's. One is, “Do you have any exciting travel planned?” The other question I often ask architects is, “Are you working on any personal pet projects?” Given the current situation, I have asked, “Were there any surprise benefits you discovered during quarantine?” Almost everyone has something that makes them light up. Asking these questions can help you move from the small talk into something more meaningful.

How do I get out of here? Even when the conversation is amazing, sometimes you want to exit gracefully but do not know how. Here is my exit strategy: “Well, *Name*, I am so happy that I was able to meet you! Do you mind if I have your business card? I would love to talk with you again.” Simple and straightforward, this formula allows you a graceful exit.

Now what? One of the biggest mistakes I see is when people spend time at an event and then fail to follow up. Do not be that person. I am a big procrastinator who hates data entry, so I found that I need to act quickly, or else I will have a stack of untouched business cards. First step – LinkedIn. Connect on the most used business social media platform. Next, if you had an interesting conversation, send a quick email letting her know how much you enjoyed talking with her. If you want to take it to another level, send a small note card. No one gets mail



anymore, so a small note saying how much you enjoyed meeting that person will be unexpected.

Alternative Networking

In our post-COVID-19 world, the ways we network may change. No one knows if we will still have large conferences or lunch events. However, the need and ability to network do not change. Some conferences are offering alternative online networking. An easy and active platform is LinkedIn.

What do I do on LinkedIn? Without going into too much detail, the biggest thing I would say for LinkedIn is to be a conscientious contributor. Even if a person is barely on LinkedIn, every time she posts, she is opening herself to her network. The single best thing you can do is validate those thoughts by making a legitimate comment, not just the autogenerated ones. Relationships grow stronger based on proximity and frequency. LinkedIn allows you to have both of those, even if you are miles away.

Conclusion

Many people place a significant amount of pressure on themselves to be charming, outgoing, and witty at networking events. In reality, as an introvert, your ability to listen and delve into more in-depth conversations gives you the ability to connect in a meaningful way. When in doubt, remember it is better to be interested than interesting!▪



Janki DePalma is an Associate and Business Development Manager at DCI Engineers. Janki serves as President-Elect of the Society for Marketing Professional Services Austin chapter, and is an active member of AIA, UII Next, and CREW. (jdepalma@dc-engineers.com)