

MAKE YOUR Mark

A guide to expand and harness your professional networking skills

BY STEPHANIE RILEY

as a marketing professional, I attend multiple conferences, forums, trade shows and exhibitions each year. My intention at these professional events is simple — to promote my company. However, the preparation and execution of successful networking is not so simple. It involves research, goal setting, communication, pursuit and consciousness. Business development and networking are crucial to companies and/or professionals' success and growth. Whether you're a natural-born communicator or shy by nature, this article will take a deeper dive into professional networking and provide tips and advice on how to maximize relationships made through interactions at business events.

Establish Networking Goals

Goals are helpful in many aspects of our professional and personal lives. They are like roadmaps, providing direction toward a specific objective(s). Goals help define the purpose and intention behind networking. Why are you attending the event? Are you in search of a new job? Are you looking to get involved in the organization hosting the event? The answers to these questions will define your goals and help ensure you engage and connect with the right people. Of course, you wouldn't want to turn anyone away that approaches you, but setting goals allows you to focus your time and energy on your purpose for attending the event.

Each person with whom you connect will serve a unique purpose in your growing professional network. In an online May 2018 article, Forbes writer and executive coach Bonnie Marcus believes that to create a reliable and active network, your activity needs to be strategic. "To create the type of network that supports your ambition, your efforts must be intentional and purposeful," she says.





The next time you attend a conference or business networking event, review the list of attendees to research and set goals for your approach and ensure that your networking is deliberate. I always print a list (an outdated practice, I know) and highlight those who I think would benefit my company and align with my intentions for attending. Sometimes, if contact information is included, I will send a brief email message before the event introducing myself and letting the person know that I look forward to meeting him or her. I do this so that my name and company will get in front of the potential connection prior to the networking opportunity.

Networking is a Two-Way Street

People enjoy talking about themselves, but most of us don't want to hear someone else go on and on about himself or herself. Networking has to be a two-way street. In sales, there's a principle called the 80/20 Rule. The Rule states that the sales representative (or initiating professional) should spend 80% of the conversation listening and only 20% speaking. While this Rule seems a little extreme for a friendly chat, it's good to listen more and talk less. A LinkedIn article, powered by AI, titled, "How Do You Balance Listening and Talking When Networking with Others?" provides excellent tips to maintain balance in professional networking conversations. "One of the best ways to balance listening and talking when networking is to be genuinely curious and attentive to the other person," states the article. The article encourages active listening, asking open-ended questions and avoiding interruption.

Although you want to listen more and speak less, you do need to share your value with the person. Have an "elevator pitch" prepared. An elevator pitch is a brief 30- to 60- second way to introduce yourself and make an impression in the amount of time you may be in an elevator with someone. It should include your name and company, as well as address your skills, and present you and your company's experience and/or goals in a way that is relevant to the other person. Remember, if you set goals and know your purpose before an event, the people you approach and the conversations you have are more likely to directly impact your career.

Introverts or those who don't enjoy networking may think it's easier said than done to walk up to someone and have an instant connection. It can feel awkward and inorganic if it's something you don't enjoy doing or don't do often — but do not fret. Braindate.com's online blog notes in an entry that shy people are more likely to spend time observing, which is important. "This allows them to learn about people — through their actions, their energy — before they connect with them," the blog article states. Introverts tend to be more conscious and consider their thoughts before speaking, which leads to more significant discussions.

Whether you are introverted, extroverted, shy or outgoing, a networking discussion should always be a give and take. Be conscious to listen more and talk less. Find common ground with the person, be curious and attentive, share your worth with them and be fully engaged to effectively form connections and build a network.



Follow Up and Foster Connections

Once you have attended networking events, collected and handed out numerous business cards and established beneficial connections in-person and online, it's time to continue to build and foster those relationships. One time, I was working with a popular lawyer who was very respected by members of a prestigious, national attorney organization. While we were meeting virtually to do a dry run of our collaborative panel discussion for the organization's annual meeting, I could hear his email notification chiming relentlessly. I finally made a comment about how busy he must be, and he responded, "It's all of the past people I have met at annual meetings reaching back out a year later. I don't even know who more than half of them are." Both of us continued to discuss the need to foster and follow up with connections made at networking events and conferences.

Another important aspect of building a relationship and rapport with a new connection is promptly following up. Just as you had numerous conversations with different people, so did those people. The rule of thumb is to follow up with personalized email messages or even text messages within 24 hours, thanking them for their time and expressing interest in their work. It's always good to include an action item in your emails, too. Ask them an open-ended question or propose a time to go to lunch or meet again. This way, your newly made connections are encouraged to respond to you. Including a personal piece of information you remember about someone from your conversation in your initial follow-up shows him or her that you were paying attention and are open to nurturing the connection.

Recently, I was tasked with finding a regional representative for an IRWA subcommittee. I opened my imaginary Rolodex to mentally scour members' names with whom I had made connections with outside of my local Chapter and Region at previous IRWA conferences, Forums and meetings. One person with whom I have interacted at every IRWA International Education Conference that I have attended came to mind, so I sent him a message on LinkedIn, hoping that he would remember me. Well, not only did he remember me, but he asked if I was the same Stephanie that had a birthday in Denver, which I was. He took a personal tidbit of information I gave him in one of our many conversations, remembered it and used it to grow our professional relationship further — and it worked! I will now look forward to reconnecting with this member each time I see him because I know he actively listens to me during our chats.

Re-establish contact with connections made through networking regularly, but not too frequently. Use different channels, such as social media, telephone or email, to communicate with them and utilize different occasions, like

holidays, birthdays or milestones to reach out to them. The key is to let the person know that you remember them and are interested in building and maintaining a mutually beneficial professional relationship.

What's Still Holding You Back?

While some hit the ground networking without a second thought, others may still be hesitant to dive into the next meet and greet cocktail hour. What still could be holding some back from, or getting excited about, networking? Marcus writes in her Forbes article that one thing that prevents building a professional network is "our mindset that networking is self-serving." She continues, "And when we believe that any attempt to establish relationships is only for our benefit, we are less inclined to pursue these conversations." Ensuring that you express the value that you can bring a potential client or connection can help ease the self-serving mentality.

Some of us may limit our network. It's easy to live in a comfort zone of those that we already know and like. Being too closed off, however, limits exposure and potential for growth. Some of us may be shortsighted and expect a network to form without being proactive. It isn't good to wait until you need something — a job, a favor, a reference, etc. If you haven't nurtured the relationships, the size of your network and its support will dwindle quickly.

A robust and mutually beneficial professional network can't happen overnight, but with preparation, intention and cultivation, anyone can develop first-rate connections. Prepare and set goals before attending a networking event. Actively listen and ask questions with intention, and finally, cultivate new connections with follow-up and follow through. Marcus says, "It takes a village to have a successful career; people who provide you with information, connect you to others, help you get your job done, advocate for you, mentor, guide and sponsor you." All of these professionals contribute to a thriving and long-lasting professional network. 🌟



Stephanie Riley is the current IRWA Chapter 10 webmaster and chair of its Communications and Relations Committee. Since March 2020, she has been the director of communications and marketing for Yasmin L. Stump Law Group, PC ("YLSLG") where she oversees the firm's website, social media and business development and marketing initiatives. Additionally, Stephanie is extensively involved in the planning and execution of educational and sponsorship programs and events for both YLSLG and Chapter 10.