

# SCHMOOZE FACTOR

## NETWORKING AT INDUSTRY EVENTS

YOU'VE TAKEN TIME OUT of your busy workday to attend an industry event, now make it worth your while. Yes, the speakers and education sessions are worthy and informative. But if you don't put down the phone and start talking to the people around you, you'll miss out on a golden opportunity to network. You should always be networking, but industry events offer special prospects. Why? First, everyone there is somehow involved in your field of work, providing you a chance to ask others about questions or problems that plague you. Second, you're all hearing the same speakers and sharing the same space, giving you plenty of common topics to break the ice. And, finally, everyone is there with the goal of self-improvement and education, making them especially receptive to talking to new people.

At the next industry event you attend, start taking advantage of networking opportunities. Try these tips for working the room:

**Plan ahead.** Take a look at the attendee list and the event brochure. Note what sessions seem especially interesting to you and the names of people you'd like to meet. Doing this can help you focus your priorities and help you meet the kind of people who most intrigue you.

**Talk small.** Remember you're looking to gain information, ideas, and future contacts—but you don't want to overwhelm people. Don't start out by talking business. Make small talk instead. Not only does it put people at ease to learn how you just baked your first loaf of bread or took jet-skiing lessons, it's a way to express who you really are. That honesty will attract people to you, and set the scene to discuss larger concepts.

**Know your audience.** Pay attention to positional power. You wouldn't have the same discussion with a CEO that you might have with a beginning manager. Being around CEOs can be intimidating, especially for younger colleagues. A good bet is to ask questions. Try "How's business?" or "How did you get started in the industry?" Putting the focus on others is flattering and can help draw them out. Another useful strategy is to keep up with pop culture. Know enough about what's current in movies, television, and sports to be able to express opinions and ask questions.

**Don't interrupt.** You're talking to a potential client, and a competitor elbows his way into the conversation. Don't lose your cool. Find an appropriate lull, and address the person you were speaking to originally: "I'd love to finish our conversation sometime. Here's my card. May I have one of yours?" You can also follow this up with, "Let's meet at the bar for a drink later on. Are you available at 10?" (And, remember, if you're doing the inviting, the first round of drinks is on you.)

**Keep it light.** Generally speaking, serious discussions don't happen when people have a drink in one hand and a canapé in the other. There might be a lot of serious things going on in the world right now, but be sure to think before you speak. Networking is not about proselytizing or making judgments. Be careful not to alienate your listeners.

**Know your limits.** When you're hungry, thirsty, or falling-down tired, it's time to excuse yourself. Don't risk staying and looking bored or stressed. If you feel it, they'll see it.

**Follow-up.** After the networking is done and you're back at the office, don't forget to follow-up and follow through. If you promised to send someone an e-mail or give someone a call, do it.

Don't be frustrated if your initial efforts don't seem to amount to much. Networking doesn't always generate direct results. Maybe you've just shaken hands with someone you'll never meet again. Then again, maybe you've just met your next vice president of operations. You never know.



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