

Face-to-Face Networking in the Dot.Com World

By Mary Crane

In a dot.com world filled with social networking web sites, many young professionals erroneously believe that old-fashioned meet and greet events are now passé. Yet, even some of the most tech savvy people in the world understand the value of building relationships live rather than on-line.

Consider the example of Bill Gates and his friend and mentor, Warren Buffett. When Gates and Buffett first met many years ago, Buffett made it clear that he didn't understand computer software, and he had no interest in really learning about it. Gates accepted this fact. Each time he met with Buffett, Gates put aside his own interests in technology and instead concentrated on other hobbies that he and Buffett shared.

Over games of Bridge, the two billionaires bonded. And just look at how that relationship has paid off. In 2006, Buffett committed to donating approximately two-thirds of his wealth to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

As a successful young professional, keep the following in mind to make the most out of any networking event:

Prepare, prepare, prepare. In order to take full advantage of networking events, it is wise to educate yourself beforehand. Invest time researching the host of the event and if applicable, any sponsoring organizations. Try to decipher why the program is being held and what type of people will be attending. With this knowledge, think about what type of contacts you would like to make and more specifically what you'd hope to get out of these interactions. Having a firm understanding of the event details will allow you to jump start conversations and maximize these opportunities.

Develop a few questions that anyone can be asked. The #1 concern most young professionals express about networking events is that they hate to talk about themselves. If this sounds familiar, the easiest way to avoid self-disclosure is to instead give other people the opportunity to talk. Attend networking events armed with a handful of questions that you can ask virtually anyone: What brings you to this event? How long have you been with your firm? Do you live in the city or commute? Do you have big plans for the summer? You'll quickly find that there's an added advantage to asking lots of questions. People tend to view those who ask questions as being among the best conversationalists in the room.

Make your introduction memorable. Prior to any networking event, prepare an introduction that will help make you memorable to others whom you will meet. Think of one or two sentences that describe who you are and what you do. In fact, I like to recommend that you view your introduction as your own 30-second commercial. Remember, at a City Bar event, nearly every attendee will be a lawyer. A general introduction such as, "Hi, I'm Mary, a lawyer at XYZ firm," will hardly make you memorable. Instead, introduce yourself by focusing on attributes that make you especially unique.

Use business cards with purpose. Every person who attends a networking event has a responsibility to mingle. Sometimes, however, it may be difficult to end a conversation. Initiating the exchange of business cards can help you politely say your good-byes. Simply tell the other person, "It's been a real delight to meet you," and then ask, "Do you have a business card?" Finish by stating that you look forward to staying in touch. And then move on. By the way, following the networking event, make sure

you review all of the business cards that you received and make notes regarding potential common interests of a business or personal nature.

Don't forget to follow-up. If you really want to build an effective professional network, attending a networking event is a great start. It is, however, only a first step. Successful professionals carefully nurture their business relationships. Stay in touch with the people you meet at these events. A periodic e-mail can help position you as a person who can bring added value to business and personal relationships. A lunch or dinner may help you seal a new deal.

By the way, if you've always hated the very concept of networking events because they sound like old-fashioned schmoozing, keep in mind that these events can be the first step in building important long-term professional relationships.

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