8 Steps for Successful Networking

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Forming and cultivating relationships is at the heart of any successful fundraising campaign, volunteer drive, committee effort or community building activity. Foster and grow new networks with these practical tips and best practices to engage someone in a conversation, keep it rolling, exchange information and wrap up.

1. Say hello. Shake hands, say your name and affiliation.

Has the following happened to you? You've done your homework and know a particular bigwig connector, funder, donor, etc. will be at a networking event. You see them and freeze. What had you planned to say? Were you thanking them? Soliciting them? As your brain tries to put together a coherent sentence, they move out of view and the opportunity has passed. Let's keep this simple. Just shake hands and say, "Hello, my name is (insert your name here)." The rest of your elevator pitch can come later, but to build a relationship, you need to start by making the connection.

2. Ask questions. People like to talk about themselves.

Now that you have their attention, follow up with an open-ended question. Why open-ended? You're looking for them to share a story, which won't happen if your question can be answered with a yes or no response. Follow Dale Carnegie's timeless advice in "How to Win Friends & Influence People" and "allow the other person to do a great deal of the talking." In other words, make fewer statements and ask more questions. For example, "How did you hear about this event?" or follow up with "How did you end up in your line of work?"

Caution is prudent here as some questions evoke anxiety or turn people off by "othering" them instead of welcoming them. While starting a conversation with a compliment is a good idea, we should be aware that often the very thing we're drawn to comment on is something that's different from ourselves. For instance, commenting on someone's height: "Wow, you're tall! How tall are you?" isn't a compliment, nor is it a conversation starter. The same is true for hair texture, skin color - basically anything that isn't chosen by the person you're talking with. In contrast, comments about sunglasses, scarves, jackets and jewelry are all things that can be perceived as compliments (provided they are positive) and graciously accepted as such. The key difference is these are all items chosen by the wearer, not a factor of who they are. Also, in today's economy it isn't wise to begin by asking what someone does for work. They may not be employed in a job or field that they love - or they may be unemployed. "What do you do to fill your day?" is a safer opening line.

3. Listen. Don't fidget or scan the crowd. Be present.

The key to asking good follow-up questions is to be an active listener. Are you checking your phone every 30 seconds? Looking over their shoulder to see who else has walked in the door? You're not present in the conversation. If you're listening, you'll be able to ask more thought-provoking questions, such as, "What motivates you?" "What are you passionate about?" Then you'll be engaging in a topic that really excites them and allows them to share their passion(s) with you.

But what if you are bored or distracted? If your ex or former boss walks in the room, you may have a hard time staying focused. Best to skip ahead to step 7 and consider reconnecting once you've regained your composure. What if you've realized they are bored or distracted? It may be possible to re-engage at another time if you don't overstay your welcome. If this happens, skip ahead to step 7.

4. Offer. Connect them to a resource or a personal connection.

At this point the conversation should be moving along nicely. You're asking interesting questions and they're sharing something about themselves. How do you move the conversation around to something you want to share? Before taking that step, build the relationship a little deeper by offering before you ask. What you offer doesn't have to be related to your business or organization. It can be a personal connection that you thought of as they were speaking. Perhaps you know a colleague they should meet, a great restaurant they should try or an organization they should check out. You'll be seen as resourceful and a great connector. They'll want to hear what you have to say next.
5. **Pitch.** How do you want them to stay connected with you?

It should be clear by this point that the focus is on building a relationship and not making a sales pitch. So consider what they've shared and how that fits into what you're there to network about. Pause as you describe your business, leaving room for them to ask you questions. Check in to see if they'd be interested to learn more rather than rambling on. Be positive about what you have to offer and don't apologize or act like you're wasting their time.

It's possible that the conversation will end before you reach this step, but if you've followed steps 1-4, you'll have the opportunity to re-engage with them another time and they'll be open to hearing more about you. In fact, if you just say your name and ask interesting and thoughtful questions, they'll think you're fascinating when the conversation ends and feel good about you when they see you next. If you just launch right into your pitch in step 1, they'll likely avoid you next time and want to protect their friends from your aggressive pitch.

6. **Exchange cards.** Jot down what you discussed or a specific follow-up.

Ideally, you'll have 2-3 pockets so you can easily reach for your business card and keep track of the other cards you've collected - placing the ones you definitely want to follow up with separate from those that were just handed to you without any discussion. Often professional clothing for women lack pockets, so plan ahead and wear a jacket or sweater that does have pockets. Alternatively, place your business cards in a specific pocket in your purse or bag so they're easy to reach for. If you only have one pocket, wrap an elastic band around your cards and put the ones you collect on the bottom of the pile (so you don't accidentally hand out someone else's card). You can turn down the corner of the cards you definitely want to follow up with so it'll be easier later to sort through them. Consider that you may be carrying a beverage or plate and practice reaching for your business cards one-handed. It's important to have your business cards accessible so this doesn't become an awkwardly long interlude with you digging deep into your bag for several minutes.

This is where having a pen comes in handy. If you've offered to share a resource with them, jot a note on the back of their card so you remember. It's also a good idea to make a note about what event you met at and the date. This will particularly come in handy if you go to more than one networking event a week. If you're a fundraiser and listening for clues about their capacity, don't write those notes down until you've stepped away in a private space. While that may be important information to listen for, no one wants to be considered important only because of their capacity to give.

7. **Wrap up.** Excuse yourself or introduce them to someone else.

It's now time to end the conversation so you (and they) can keep circulating. This comes down to 3 easy steps: grip, grin and go. First, shake hands. Then something pleasant and finally, leave. If you find yourself getting stuck in a conversation, it's likely you did the first 2 steps but not the last. Know where you're going or you might find yourself walking into a corner. And the best way to avoid being stuck in the corner is to not walk into one.

"Is there anyone in the room that you think I should meet? Great! Would you introduce me?" This is a great technique for ending a conversation and being introduced to your next contact. It also works in reverse. You can wrap up a conversation by offering to introduce them to someone else.

8. **Then Follow up.** Within 48 hours is best. Not 4 weeks later.

This is a crucial step. The relationship starts when you both make a plan to connect again. Be part of the small percentage who actually follows up. Simple steps like friending on Facebook or following on Twitter are helpful, but a short email that includes a sentence about where you met and what you spoke about sent within a couple of days of meeting will make a strong impression.

Create a system so you can check back in to invite them to an event, share a resource or make an introduction. It can be a Rolodex, spreadsheet, database or simply labeling mail in your inbox. Make sure you're doing more than collecting business cards - make sure you're actually building relationships.