

The idea of 'networking' fills many creative people with absolute dread. Sadly, though, meeting people and making connections is essential when running a business, and getting good at events is a must. Networking is primarily about building your credibility, learning from others and basically getting your name out and about. Expect to give your time and expertise and don't expect to find a client every time. Focus instead on having fun, meeting new people and developing a reputation.

Here are a few steps to making the most of your strengths at networking opportunities.

1. Start with family and friends.

Make sure that your friends and family understand your business. This can be a tough assignment, but do your best. Sometimes family are the very last people to "get it" when it comes to how a creative earns money. However, if your friends and family do get it, when they next meet someone and describe your work to them that description will be accurate. How many times have you heard someone say that they got a project from a "friend of a friend?" That can only happen when the friend knows what to say about your business.

2. Research the event.

If you're heading out of your comfort zone, do as much homework as you can before the event to find out who will be there, and how the event is structured. Is it a casual drinkies affair, or a more formalised process? Is it 'speed networking', or more relaxed? What kinds of people are likely to show up? The more information you have beforehand, the more comfortable you'll feel.

If networking is an alarming proposition, try attending a training event or conference as a way of networking. You'll all be in the same position, and having something in common is an excellent way of starting a conversation.

3. Learn how to introduce yourself.

This can be trickier than it sounds. The answer to "what do you do?" can be elusive and stressful. It's not a bad idea to practice beforehand and think of a few different ways to say your own name and describe what you do. Try the following ideas:

- Smile. Be warm and enthusiastic (but not creepy).
- Shake their hand, and keep your shake firm but not crushing (and dry!).
- Say your full name. It's more memorable.
- Explain what you do - not just your job title, but a brief description of your work.
- What's your specialty? This can trigger better conversations, but avoid using jargon. Explain yourself in simple and compelling terms.
- Be brief! You don't have to explain absolutely everything about yourself. Your intro is just a triggering point for the next part of the conversation.

Always have your business cards ready as well, and be prepared to hand over if it feels right. Also be prepared to ask the other person for theirs.

4. Arrive early.

It may seem silly, but arriving early is a good strategy if you're nervous or shy. If you arrive early you'll only have to meet a few people, and you'll have a good excuse to start a conversation. The later you arrive, the more likely you are to be overwhelmed by a large group of people.

4. Set a goal.

In order to evaluate the event, have a goal in mind. Set yourself a time limit for how long you'll stay, or make a goal of meeting X number of new people, or gathering X numbers of cards. It will help you to figure out whether or not a repeat visit to the event is worthwhile in the future – and when it's time to leave!

5. Bring a Wing Person.

If you're very nervous, don't go alone. Bring a wing-man or a wing-woman to help you out. This strategy only works if that person is NOT invested in the same event. Their job is to facilitate conversations and connections for you, not themselves (swap services when they need to attend an event instead). Split up and circulate the room, you'll then get the chance to meet twice as many people and hopefully reach your goals sooner.

6. Understand HOT – WARM – COLD

After the event, or during a conference, take yourself somewhere quiet and examine all the business cards you have collected. It's also a good idea to bring three envelopes with you, marked "cold", "warm" and "hot". Go through the cards and put them in to the appropriate envelope. The idea is to then follow up each one in the most suitable way.

- "Cold" means the person was not interested in you, or interesting enough to worry about. You can disregard if you like, or just ask for a LinkedIn connection the next day.
- "Warm" people were interested, or interesting, but not crucially important or compelling. They get a LinkedIn connection and an email the next day, a simple "nice to meet you" email is fine.
- "Hot" means a fascinating or useful person, or a potential client. They also get a LinkedIn connection, and a next-day email, but one that requests a meeting or some other call to action.

Finally, three golden rules for networking events...

Rule Number 1: Be Interested, Not Interesting

Networking events are not the right place to pitch your ideas, or audition for a role. Networking is simply about meeting people and making connections. The best way to do that is to listen, be interested in the other person, and hope that they will be interested in you.

Rule Number 2: Disavow Defensiveness

Even if you meet hideous people or objectionable wankers, don't be defensive. Defensiveness is the enemy of any kind of communication. Be open, friendly and empathetic, even if you're not receiving the same in response. If someone is awful, just be polite and walk away when you can. Rise above, and be there better person for it.

Rule Number 3: WIIFT?

It's important to enter any networking situation with your mind squarely located in "WIIFT", or the "What's In It For Them?" attitude of everyone else there. Rather than pushing your own agenda, think about how you might be able to help the people you meet, and build relationships. You'll probably feel more comfortable doing that anyway.

Good luck!

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