



Shhh, quiet... An Introvert's Guide to Networking

Don't fret about saying something clever or selling yourself. Everyone loves an introvert - all you have to do is listen!

Do not make eye contact. Pretend to look for someone by peering pensively into the middle distance. Do a few sweaty laps of the room. Get another drink. Get a third. Busy yourself with your phone and visit the loo - again. Repeat these steps then retire to the corner to hang out with that friendly looking potted plant.

Sound familiar? This tried and tested method is how not to network when faced with a roomful of strangers. For many of us - particularly introverts - networking can be excruciating. But with a bit of know-how, it doesn't have to be.

"Introverts can find networking intimidating because of all the louder extroverts in the room trying to sell themselves," says Stefan Thomas, author of *Networking for Dummies* and self-confessed introvert. "But introverts make the best networkers because they're good listeners and tend to be more interested in other people than about talking about themselves."

If you're an introvert working in an industry such as PR or the media, there's nowhere to hide from networking. Fiona Armstrong, a highly introverted PR professional, says she has had to find "introverted ways" to do "extroverted things".

"Introversion has nothing to do with shyness or general awkwardness; it is an inbuilt aversion to high stimulation environments - lots of noise, lots of people and bright lights," she says. "It's in no way a disadvantage; it's simply a different way of doing things, and introverts shouldn't become fake extroverts to fit the mold."

So if you are an introvert, how do you get the most out of a networking event?

Get there early

"Get to the event early so you're one of the first people there," says Thomas. "It is more intimidating to walk in later when conversations and groups have already formed and you find yourself having to break into them."

You might even be able to strike up some rapport with other attendees online beforehand. If it is a conference with a Twitter hashtag, for example, you can use it to engage with other people who will be there.

"If you can connect in advance it won't be a cold start and if people are talking about the event on social media it shows they should be happy to meet people at the event itself," Thomas says.

Don't worry about saying something clever

There is nothing wrong with small talk. "People get really het up about finding something clever to say but I would ditch the elevator pitch and try not to overcomplicate things," says Thomas. Just smile, stick your hand out and introduce yourself.

If there is a pause in the conversation, remember it's not just on you to fill the silence, says Armstrong. "Don't be tempted to blurt out the first thing you think of - the chances are you'll want to cringe if you do."

Introverts can use their calmness to create a sense of gravitas and presence, says psychologist Liza Walter Nelson, who has expertise in work psychology. "Introverts also generally have a depth of interests which means they are often full of facts and knowledge," she says. "As long as they come

prepared, and quell the nerves a little, this can absolutely be turned into an advantage."

Listen

"Most people enjoy talking about themselves so let them do the talking," says Dr. Rob Yeung, psychologist and author of *How to Stand Out: Proven Tactics for Getting Noticed*. "Prepare a handful of open-ended questions that you can ask pretty much anyone you meet. Ask about their job and their interest in the event, for example."

However, it is still useful to think about soundbites for when the spotlight is turned back to you, says Thomas. "Have some little nuggets which concisely describe what you do," he says.

Aim for quality rather than quantity

Most people are a little reluctant or even anxious about having to talk to complete strangers, says Yeung. If it doesn't come naturally to you, set the goal of meeting a handful of people, he says.

"Rather than networking, I sometimes say to clients I'm coaching that they should aim to engage in netfriending - chatting to people and trying to identify the one or two they genuinely like enough to consider possible friend material. If you can come away with just a few possible friends from an event, then the work benefits may flow naturally at a later date."

Look for small groups or pairs with open body language, rather than close-knit circles, says Armstrong.

Remember to take time out

Being a good networker is also about judging when it is time to move on. If you are feeling really awkward, look to make an exit by saying you need to use the facilities or get another drink.

Smile and emphasize that it was really interesting to talk to the person and would be good to talk again, says Walter-Nelson. Then take a couple of minutes to breathe.

"As an introvert though, remember to take time between talking to people and have a moment or two to yourself to do what you do best: reflect, think and reassess, keep on track."

And if you are feeling really nervous, Thomas says running your wrists under a cold tap for a few seconds can help to calm you.

Judge the vibe

Get into the mindset that the conversation is the beginning of a relationship that you'll build on later, adds Thomas. Remember that you can swap business cards and connect with people on social media afterwards. "I have seen people try too hard to sell themselves and act like a door-to-door salesman. It's very off-putting, especially if it's a holiday party."

Ultimately, be clear about why you are there and why other people are there too. At a holiday party where people are just looking to relax, the very most you should aim to come away with is their names and then you can follow up later, says Thomas.

"Try to relax and keep it light. Respect that people are there to socialize - and be careful how much you drink."