



Four Steps to Effective Networking

Build relationships to expand your circle of contacts.

By Renee Herrell

Networking can help you find new donors, partners, and board members, while building a lifelong community of colleagues, contacts, friends, and mentors. Here are four easy steps:

1. Meet and Greet.

Seek out places where people mingle, such as conferences, seminars, fundraisers, continuing education classes, university open houses, and business networking functions. Before an event, do your homework. Find out who'll be attending, list those you hope to meet, and use the Internet to glean basic information about them, which you can use as conversation starters.

Practice your introduction: "My name is (your name) and I am a (job title) at (your organization's name)." Give a brief sentence describing your organization's mission. This is often called an elevator speech. In the time it takes to go up a few floors on an elevator, you want to convey to a complete stranger what you and your organization do.

At the event, introduce yourself with confidence, shake people's hands (no limp hands or wrists), smile, and make eye contact. Repeat each person's name to help you remember it.

2. Connect.

To get the conversation started, use simple, open-ended questions. Ask people where they work and what they do. When they ask you something, don't just answer "yes"

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or "no"; add a little more information about yourself and then volley a question back to them. Seek mutual connections or commonalities. Do you have children the same age? Live in the same area? Share similar hobbies? A few more conversational tips:

- Don't dominate the dialogue. Spend more time listening than talking.
- Keep it upbeat. Stay away from controversial topics unless that's the purpose of the event you're attending.
- Remember that your body language speaks louder than your words. Lean in toward the person, nod your head to show you're listening, and don't cross your arms. Look attentively into people's eyes. Don't be like the "networking jerk" Keith Ferrazzi describes in *Never Eat Alone*—the shmooze artist whose eyes dart around the room in search of bigger fish.

Networking is a two-way street: Ask to be connected, and bring others together. Introduce people to each other if they have a common interest—even if you just met them. Use thoughtful introductions like: "Michele, meet Rob. Michele is a volunteer for Save the Children. Rob is director of development for the Boys & Girls Club. Save the Children works to connect American kids with children in Africa who live in poverty. Perhaps your two organizations have a connection?"

As you wrap up the conversation, find an opportunity to exchange business cards and a reason to reconnect after the event. Be sure your cards are in a readily available place (right-hand slacks pocket or outside purse pocket); don't be rustling through your pockets or purse. As you exchange cards, write your follow-up action on the back of your new acquaintance's card to help you remember it.

Then find a graceful way to move on. If you get stuck in a conversation, let the person know you've enjoyed meeting them but need to connect with a few other people at the event.

3. Follow Up.

When you arrive back in the office, set the new business cards next to your computer to remind you of the follow-ups you need to make. In the next day or two, e-mail your new contacts. Reference the commonalities you discussed at the event, and be specific about how you want to connect: "It was a pleasure to meet you last night at the mixer. I'd like to set a time to get together in the next few weeks to discuss (name a specific topic). What dates and times would be convenient for you?" If there's not an immediate reason to get together, say, "It was great to meet you, and I'd like to stay in touch." Then tag these e-mails to pop up in a month or so. If you

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haven't heard from your new colleague, you can send a follow up e-mail.

Avoid sending group e-mails and "cc-ing" the new people you met. Making an e-mail personal to the recipient is the first step to pursuing a true relationship with a person who will benefit you richly down the road—both in new friends and professional advancement.

4. Nurture the Relationship.

Ultimately, you want to establish deeper, more meaningful connections with your new colleagues. Find ways to keep reaching out. Send articles of interest to them or invite them to events they'll enjoy. Use social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn to keep in touch.

Find creative ways to get together.

If you're both runners, suggest a run after work. Or plan to rendezvous at the next networking event and grab dinner afterwards.

As you connect with people at events, your Rolodex will grow. The people you meet will introduce you to their contacts, and you can introduce them to people you know.

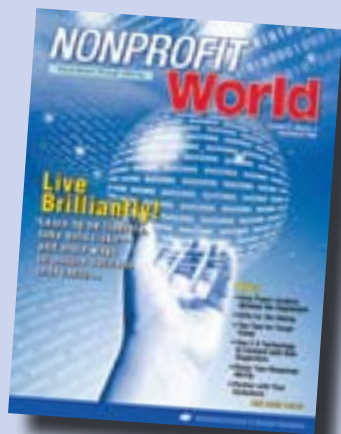
In *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell defines the ultimate networkers as "connectors"—individuals with social networks of over 100 people. Connectors have an extraordinary knack of making friends and acquaintances, and they like to share their contacts by connecting other people with one another. Connectors develop relationships with people from all walks of life and bring together those who work or live in different social, cultural, pro-

fessional, and economic circles. Your goal is to become a connector.

Effective networking is about transitioning the social occasion to a meaningful relationship. With diligence, you'll further the mission of your organization while making friends, advancing your career, and having fun. ■

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