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How to Solo at a Networking Event

If you feel closed out because everyone's already engaged, here are some tips that can help.

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A friend sent me the following, which I'm addressing as this month's topic because I know so many of you can relate. Here's what she wrote (edited a bit to protect the innocent):

I ran into an interesting networking experience this week that I wanted to ask your advice about.

The Rancho County chapter of NALBO held its annual Remarkable Ladies awards event on Thursday. There was a VIP reception at 5:30, followed by a dinner and awards program at 6:30.

I was invited to both, and accepted. A former colleague invited me to the dinner and I was familiar with this particular event because I'd participated before.

So I arrived, immediately caught up with my old co-worker, and ventured into the affair. She got grabbed away immediately. And I found myself standing by myself in a room full of women already talking animatedly with one another. I did manage to say hello to a couple of people I knew, but almost before we could start chatting, someone would run up, hug 'em, and draw them into conversation. You can see my dilemma.

All the networking advice discusses what to say and what not to say to people at a networking event -- but it doesn't say how to get someone's attention or break into a conversation gracefully if you happen to be attending an event by yourself. One woman I know approached me at one point and asked why I was by myself. She claimed that everyone in NALBO knows to open up their circle to others. But I didn't even know how to ask.

At the same time, I did witness an example of how NOT to network during a couple of short breaks in the action at dinner, when two attorneys from the same firm (at different times) ran up to our table and essentially threw their business cards at me and the woman I was seated next to before running back to their seats. They didn't know who we were and didn't seem to care.

Anyhow, any advice on my networking dilemma?

In order for my advice to make sense, let's keep in mind a few basics about networking:

1. You should always set a few goals for yourself before attending any event.

2. It's ideal to attend events with a "community service mind-set." This means you go with the intention of helping your community (all the event attendees) by offering help to others first. If someone offers you help, well, that's just gravy.

Let's start with how you can handle the first scenario. When you are solo at an event and find yourself outside a circle of people you'd like to join (maybe because they're talking about something fun and laughing or it's a topic you know all about), the best thing to do is to approach the group with a warm smile and try to make eye contact with one of them. If someone else is in mid-sentence, quietly ask, "May I join you?" And if you're really feeling brave, add: "I'm new to this event (or group or city)." Or "I believe he had more than 2 million hits on that video on YouTube." Or "This sounds like a fun group." You get the idea.

If you soon find that there's a lull in the conversation, or separate conversations start, you can either say with a smile, "Hi everyone, I'm Sandy Jones-Kaminski." Or just turn to one of the people next to you and introduce yourself to them with a warm smile, offering your hand for a nice firm (not limp, not bone-crushing) handshake.

At group events like the one my friend attended, I always ask if the people I meet are members of the group or association. It starts a conversation where you can learn more about the group and the person by asking how the group has helped their business or career development.

And if you're not a group-crashing sort of person, I have two other pieces of advice that I've used and have seen help solo attendees again and again:

1. Find the event's host(s) or any of its sponsors and introduce yourself to them with the same warm smile and handshake as above, and then thank them for hosting and/or sponsoring the event. Remember, these people are hosting the event and they want everyone there to have a good experience, just as you would if you were hosting a party or event. You can then ask about their connection to or role with the group/event and find out what their goals are for the evening. You might be surprised by what you learn, and maybe you'll discover a few ways you might help them. If nothing comes to mind immediately, ask for a business card and make a note of their need on the back of it. Let them know you'll be in touch if you come across whatever it is they need.

At that point, explain what made you attend the event and your own goals for attending, and just wait and see what happens next. More often than not, they just might try to help you connect with other folks at the event or will follow up with you via e-mail or phone.

2. Get in line for something, whether it's food, drink or the bathroom (seriously). Use that time to ask the person of your choice (in front or behind you) if she's connected to the event or a member, or know anyone who was nominated. Or if it's someone you know slightly, try one of my all-time favorite openers, which anyone can answer: Find out what they're working on. For example, "Hi Britney, good to see you. Sandy Jones-Kaminski from Bella Domain (in case she looks like she doesn't remember you); we met at the spring luncheon. How are things going? (Let them answer.) So what are you working on these days? Anything exciting?"

Sometimes the answer is something fun, like planning a trip to Australia. Or it might be something you

can assist them with by connecting them to a resource. If there aren't any lines at the event, just look around for another solo person and practice any of the techniques mentioned above. I've met some of my favorite contacts that way, and they now make it a practice to do the same thing whenever they attend any type of event.

In closing, I want to make a plea here to all the extroverted networkers out there to please make it one of your goals for the evening to make it easier for our introverted friends to join the circle when they approach. Be the one to smile at the newcomers and welcome them into the group. Or if you see them standing solo, wave them over or just walk over and introduce yourself and bring them back to the group. How easy is that?

P.S. In regard to the bad behavior my friend experienced at the hands of the business card tossers, I recommended she send them a copy of or link to my book, *I'm at a Networking Event -- Now What???* I have an entire chapter on what NOT to do at networking events and, boy, do they need coaching at that firm. Not only are they damaging their firm's brand, but that type of behavior is what creates reluctant networkers in the first place. We *have* to stop it.

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