

## How to Network: 12 Tips for Shy People

Schmoozing is a trial for shy people, but armed with these common-sense tips they can increase their networking mojo.

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Networking is the key to success in business, says Keith Ferrazzi, business coach and author of *Never Eat Alone*, a book about the power of relationship building and networking. It helps you find jobs, recruit talent, win new customers and discover investors who'll support your ideas.

But networking is a trial for shy people—geeks especially. They view it as insincere at best, manipulative at worst. They eschew networking for a variety of reasons including lack of confidence, fear of rejection and a sense of unworthiness.

If they could just relate to others more easily, if they just possessed more self-confidence and weren't such self-conscious wallflowers, the world would be their oyster, and schmoozing would be so much easier.

It is possible for shrinking violets and shy guys to master the skill of networking. They just have to realize, says Ferrazzi, that successful networking is all about building intimate, sincere relationships based on mutual generosity, not duplicity, and that they can't achieve their career goals on their own. They have to network their way to success.

If you're struggling to meet new people, here's some common-sense advice for increasing your networking mojo.

### **Start Small**

If the idea of approaching people you don't know intimidates you, begin your networking efforts by seeking out familiar faces, such as relatives and friends.

"You can do a significant amount of valuable networking without ever having to make a cold call," says Lynne Sarikas, the director of Northeastern University's MBA Career Center. "Starting with a known [contact] instead of an unknown demystifies the [networking] process and helps get a shy person over the hurdle." A series of successful conversations will make you more confident in the process, Sarikas adds.

A logical next step after talking with friends and family is to pursue individuals who graduated from your college. Your alumni network can be a gold mine of connections, says Sarikas. It exists for the purpose of networking, so contacting an alum out of the blue shouldn't feel like a cold call. After all, they joined the network to make and take such calls.

### **Stop Apologizing**

Introverts and inexperienced networkers often apologize when asking for an individual's

help because they see networking as an imposition, not as an exercise in relationship building, says Sarikas.

"They feel like they're asking someone to do them a favor. They don't think they're worth someone else's time so they're apologizing for it," she says.

Apologizing merely demonstrates your lack of professionalism and confidence. It's also annoying and juvenile. You don't have to apologize for asking for help. You don't have to apologize for wanting to learn more about the individual with whom you're networking. One day you may be able to help her out.

### **Tap into Your Primal Instincts**

"Humans are hard-wired as communal, tribal animals, so the shy person isn't shy by nature," says Ferrazzi. "They are shy by design. Something happened to them to make them want to recoil."

Sometimes, when an introvert hears that he's not inherently a loner, that humans are innately social creatures, the realization helps him emerge from his shell of shyness, he says.

### **Be Yourself**

Many introverted professionals think they have to act like an extrovert in networking situations. While you do have to make an effort to be more gregarious than normal, you shouldn't be artificial.

"You don't have to be the schmoozer," says Never Eat Alone's Ferrazzi. The problem with the schmoozer's approach to networking is that he doesn't have the right intent: He's not interested in helping other people—only himself, says Ferrazzi.

"Be the authentic, aw-shucks, humble, shy person you are. It can be endearing. Don't try to be something you're not," adds Ferrazzi.

In other words, it's OK if you're a little awkward. Just don't keep apologizing for it.

### **Tap into Your Passions**

Sarikas recommends joining clubs and attending events that relate to an interest or activity you enjoy. If you're a budding oenophile, attend a wine tasting at your local liquor store. Eager reader? Join a book club. Can't get enough of the pigskin? Attend a football game or watch one at a bar.

"Just because you're a technology professional doesn't mean you should only go to technology conferences to network," says Sarikas. "That person sitting in front of you [at the ball game] might have a job you always dreamed about or work in a company that you want to get into. You could sit behind them the whole season and never know that unless you initiate a conversation."

The advantage of engaging in activities you enjoy with other people is that it makes

conversation so much easier. So while you're analyzing the cabernet's nose, discussing the plot of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* or sharing game stats, ask the person with whom you're chatting for her name and about her work. There's no reason not to do so if you're having an amiable conversation.

Attending gatherings where you feel comfortable helps you put your best foot forward, says Debra Feldman, an executive talent agent and job search expert. "Avoid situations where you might be stressed, rushed or distracted from your networking mission," she adds.

If you do find yourself in a room full of strangers at a technology conference or party, Ferrazzi recommends going straight to the stuff that interests you. "When you talk about things you're passionate about, you will light up and appear more engaging," he says. "You don't have to find a shared interest [to connect with others]. You just have to share your interests." So be sure to ask the people around you what they do in their spare time.

### **Ask for Introductions**

Peter Handal, Dale Carnegie & Associates' chairman, CEO and president, notes that shy people attending conferences tend to find one person with whom they spend all their time for the duration of the event.

Although settling in with one person may be more comfortable for the introvert than introducing himself to lots of new people, says Handal, it defeats the purpose of networking.

He recommends that the shy person ask his new buddy if the new buddy knows anyone else and if the new buddy could make some introductions on his behalf. "That's a nice soft way for people at the shy end of the spectrum to meet others," says Handal.

### **Be Generous**

Sometimes shy people have trouble networking because they don't think they have anything significant, such as a job or a contact, to give back to someone who helped them.

Although networking works best when you do have something to offer, what you offer doesn't have to be a job, says Ferrazzi. Sincere interest in the other person—even flattery—is a form of generosity and goes a long way when you're networking, he says. "Be authentic, share your passions and help other people feel good about themselves or be successful—that's all you have to do to network," he says.

### **Be Prepared**

If you're afraid you'll freeze up or get tongue-tied in a social setting, prepare yourself in advance. Think of ice-breaker questions you can ask people you meet. If you're attending an event specifically to network your way to a new job, have your personal pitch ready, says Feldman. She also recommends anticipating questions you may be asked, such as why you're looking for a new job, and have clear, concise answers at the ready. "Your

delivery has to be attention grabbing to overcome interruptions and compensate for a lack of privacy," she says.

### **Follow Up**

Sharing information—whether a website, article, report or phone number—with new contacts builds your credibility, says Sarikas. So if you promised to e-mail a report to someone you met on the plane, make sure you do that.

"When you do what you've said you were going to do, it gives the other person the impression that you keep your word," she says. If you don't, you're just another schmoozer.

### **Get Over Your Fear of Rejection**

In the course of networking, you'll encounter people who can't or don't want to help you. That's life, says Sarikas. Don't take it personally and don't dwell on it. It's all part of the process.

### **Take Risks**

When you overcome your fear of rejection, it'll be easier to make cold calls and strike up conversations with strangers.

"The person sitting next to you at a banquet or on an airplane may be feeling as uncomfortable as you are and will appreciate you breaking the ice," says Sarikas. "They just might be a fabulous contact for you or know the right person for you to talk to." You just won't know until you try.

### **See a Shrink**

If you can't open up to people, you'll never be able to network. And if you absolutely can not overcome your shyness on your own, Ferrazzi recommends seeing a therapist who can help you understand why you're so shy and give you the tools to change.

"Your ability to be intimate with others is the core of networking," says Ferrazzi. "Shy people know at their core that they're lonely and long for more intimacy. They just don't have the courage and the confidence to achieve it."