

Are You Doing It Wrong? How to Make Networking Really Work.

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Networking. Does the very thought of getting out there, shaking hands, and schmoozing give you butterflies? You are not alone. But networking, either informally or at an organized event, is something that everyone should actively do--no matter how old they are or where they're at in their career.

"You always love a job until you don't--or until it no longer loves you--so continuing to build and strengthen your network even when you're employed will help you maximize your options if and when it's time to move on," says career expert Liz Lynch.

As founder of The Center for Networking Excellence and the author of "Smart Networking," Lynch knows a strong network can help you get industry information quickly and find opportunities to grow your business. But a recent Yahoo! HotJobs poll found that networking or an in-person referral is the most effective way to find a job today, too: over 20 percent of surveyed workers and job seekers say they've stepped up in-person networking activities in the past year.

Too often, poor preparation or lack of follow-up make networking ineffective. Fortunately, there are some simple things to do before, during, and after networking to ensure that you make a lasting impression.

Polish your image

You just never know when you'll run into a potential client or employer, so it's important to be ready to network at any time. That means keeping business cards handy and up-to-date with a mobile number and links to a professional website and/or a LinkedIn profile.

Prep your elevator pitch

Lynch says it's necessary to be able to answer the question "What do you do?" with a response that rolls off your tongue without being too long or full of jargon and buzzwords. "If you're currently unemployed, you want to answer confidently and in a way that focuses on what you're looking for instead of what you've been through," adds Lynch.

Rachel Weingarten, a marketing and brand strategist, says this is especially important if you've spent years repeating the same thing and ignoring how your skills may have evolved. An easy way to do this is paying attention to how people you admire in your industry are describing themselves. "Don't copy them, but use it as inspiration to create your own short, snappy self description," advises Weingarten.

Target your efforts

To make a real impact with networking, hone in on events and opportunities targeted to your industry. Freelance journalist Gina Roberts-Grey suggests joining a professional organization. "Members often introduce each other to colleagues and share contact information," says Roberts-Grey, adding that networking is also a main function of industry conferences. "Attendees expect to be approached in elevators, hallways, and even bathrooms."

Toot your horn (but pay attention, too)

Once you're talking, Roberts-Grey says, "Don't be afraid to brag a little. If you don't tell the world what you're doing, chances are no one else will." Lynch says that you should also listen and try to find ways to be of help. "Find out if they would be open to meeting with you so you can learn more about their company. Don't push your resume. Focus first on building the relationship," she adds.

Follow up

Roberts-Grey recommends sending an e-mail or follow-up note as soon as possible after the meeting. Weingarten says, "It's polite and professional and works toward cementing more of a relationship with the person you just met," and she suggests including specific details of the conversation.

You should also do your homework by researching growth sectors and average salaries in your industry so you'll be ready to negotiate if you have the opportunity. Says Roberts-Grey, "Don't be afraid to show that you're ready, willing, and able to work with them."