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Speed Networking: A Way to Expand Your Professional Contacts

Networking can be one of the most powerful and productive activities an individual can do to launch and manage their career. Building an interconnected group of relationships with others is at the core of a person's effectiveness both personally and professionally. In the workplace today, we need to be known to others as well as ensure that others are aware of how we might be a resource for them. Having a network of people you can tap into for information, advice and opportunities, while sharing your own, is paramount.

Speed networking has emerged as a variation of traditional business networking activities for meeting people. Speed networking is a structured and fast paced networking event allowing participants to interact with others, typically in a series of brief one-on-one information exchanges. Speed networking takes its cue from speed dating, an event where individuals are allowed a short amount of time to meet a number of prospective dates, one at a time, and then choose who they would like to provide their contact information. Where interest is mutual, the contact leads to a date.

Speed networking is the business version of speed dating. However, in speed networking events, the participants readily share contact information with each other and decide themselves who they will follow up with. This type of event can provide exposure to a lot of people in a short amount of time. It is a way to let others know who you are and what you are looking for, whether new customers or clients, business or sales leads, or a new job. Professional associations and chambers of commerce may offer speed networking opportunities at a monthly meeting or as part of an annual conference.

Round Robin Format Moves Briskly

The typical format for speed networking is called a round robin. The event leader will usually ring a bell, sound a buzzer, or blow a whistle to indicate the beginning and end of each round. Once the round begins, you introduce yourself and your purpose for being there, share your business card and perhaps, business brochure. A few questions and answers back and forth can quickly clarify if there is any potential for a follow up phone call or meeting. At the halfway point, the conversation switches to the second person, who introduces themselves and their reason for attending. After a second exchange of information, the event leader rings a bell and you move on to the next person.



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Over the next hour or two, you continue to meet individuals, one at a time. Ideally, the event culminates with time allowed for open networking, either for talking to individuals you did not get to talk to, or seeking out someone who you met during the event and continuing the conversation.

Some variations of speed networking include meeting with a succession of small groups of individuals throughout the event. Upon arrival, pre-registered participants are assigned a sequence of groups or tables to follow during the event, insuring that they are always meeting new people in each group. Another variation matches people up ahead of time based on their purpose for attending the speed networking event.

Preparation for Speed Networking

- Practice a 60-second statement that includes your name, title or occupation, and what you are looking for, such as information, leads or a job. Some people like speed networking because you get right to the point and there is no time for small talk.
- Make sure you have a supply of business cards ready. Sometimes event planners will suggest a number; bring at least 30. If you are unemployed at the time, get business cards with your contact information and occupation printed on them.
- Assemble brochures, resumes or other type of handout, if applicable.
- Bring a pen, notepad, and your appointment calendar with you.
- Usually attire is either business or business casual. Check with the organizers if it is not stated.
- Remember that you have a few seconds to make a positive first impression.

During the Event

- First of all, have fun. The fast pace of this kind of event contributes to a high level of energy in the room.
- Usually 2-5 minutes are allowed for each round; the leader will inform the group about the time frame.
- As you meet each person, shake hands and exchange names and business cards. Read each card as you accept it. A good system to keep the cards



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organized: keep your business cards in one jacket pocket, and the business cards given to you in the other.

- The first person introduces themselves and their purpose, and a very brief conversation takes place.
- Be extremely aware of the time factor so the second person doesn't get their time cut short. Talking too long in a situation like this is highly insensitive and damages your first impression.
- Take notes on the back of your partner's business card. This may include notes on how they look or what they are wearing to help you remember them.
- Suggest a next step, if appropriate. You will not have time to schedule a phone call or meeting, so follow up the next day will be important.
- Above all, respect the process. At the signal, end your conversation immediately and move, or allow the other person to move, to next person. You can always continue conversations later.

After the speed networking event, review the business cards of the individuals you met and scan or enter the information into the contact database software you may use. Send an email within 24-48 hours to each person you want to follow up with. Better yet, make a phone call to continue the conversation or book a meeting or lunch to move the relationship along.

Outcomes

Certainly, one of the goals of speed networking is to meet new individuals who can directly be of help to you. But your goal shouldn't stop there. Each person you meet has a network of individuals they know, and it may be one of those persons who will be a good match for you. By meeting individuals during the course of a speed networking event, you potentially "plug in" to the people they know, greatly extending your ability to connect with individuals related to your goals.

To be effective at your job, manage your career, and find new opportunities, it's not just what you know and what you can do, but also who you know. Speed networking can be another tool in your professional toolkit to contribute to your success.