

An Introvert's Guide to Networking

By Rebekah Campbell

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The Tech Start-Up

Trying to get off the ground before the money runs out.

Every week, I get invited to another “must attend” business event sure to be full of important people who could affect my business. I know I *should* go, but it's a chore. All too often, I end up standing in a corner clinging to the one person I know, feeling guilty that I'm not taking advantage of the situation.

Recently, I attended a business women's networking breakfast, held in a large warehouse near the waterfront. I marched through the door and collected my name tag to confront a roomful of 1,200 colorfully dressed, high-energy women chattering. Everyone appeared to be having a great time, making connections.

What next? Do I know anyone here? If I stand all alone will people think I'm weird? I feel my chest tighten.

I suspect that many of us struggle at these events, but few admit it. Everyone slaps on a smile and wanders around the room shaking hands, laughing and exchanging business cards. Inside, some of us feel awkward, loitering at the edge of conversations, unsure whether to enter the group or slip away.

That's me. If you follow my posts, this may surprise you. I've built a powerful network and convinced leaders from Google, eBay, Twitter and Facebook to support my start-up, so you might suppose that I'm an expert schmoozer. Truth is, as an introvert, I've struggled with networking for years. I'd

much rather be home reading a book.

But I recognize the importance of this type of activity, so I stick to it — primarily because a few chance encounters at events have led to relationships that have made all the difference in my business. I have to accept that networking doesn't come naturally to me, and that's hard. I'm a perfectionist. I like to be good at things. So I've developed techniques to help me form relationships and improve, even enjoy, the networking process. If you, too, struggle with networking, here are a few ideas that may help.

Have short conversations with lots of people. Follow up later.

I find it difficult to form deep connections at events. Instead, I try to have short conversations with as many people as possible, making sure I have their contact information so I can follow up later. If I see someone I want to talk to, I politely dart in and say, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but such and such suggested we meet. I have to run in a minute and just wanted to get your business card so I can follow up later." It's quite hard for people to say no to this. And then after the event, I reach out and set up lunch or coffee. That's an environment in which I'm much more comfortable.

Focus on what you're good at.

Although I find large informal groups a challenge, I know that I perform well in formal presentation settings or one-on-one conversations. Instead of worrying about my inability to charm at large-group events, I focus my on my more natural ability to engage people one-on-one and to speak publicly. If you can kill it in a one-on-one presentation, that's all you need to do to build a network.

It's about forming a few close relationships.

Some people have hundreds or even thousands of people in their network. Other than on social networks where I don't know most of the people to whom I'm supposedly connected, I'd say my close business network includes about 15 people, but they are special. Every year, I meet between one and three people who are magic. It's never about what this person can do for me; it's a realization that I've encountered someone I can learn from. Almost all of the good things

that have come to me have come from one of these 15 people.

We introverts have different strengths. For example, check out this great TED talk by Susan Cain on “The Power of Introverts.” I spent years thinking that I should be different — louder, funnier, more extroverted. Now I recognize the need to be grateful for the talents that I do have.

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