



Christine Zust, president, Zust & Co.

personal space

How to take advantage of face-to-face networking opportunities

By Erik Cassano

“Tell me about yourself.”

It's a simple statement, but when you're trying to turn a stranger into an acquaintance, it's a powerful four-word tool — one that you should always keep at the ready when you attend a business networking event.

“Most of the people at networking events use the phrase ‘What do you do?’” says Christine Zust, president of Zust & Co., a Westlake-based professional development firm. “But that's one of the most impersonal statements I've ever heard. It's about your position, not about you as a person.”

Although social media platforms create new avenues for professional relationship building, face-to-face networking opportunities provide a level of personal contact that online networking can't. And if you run a business, you have to get out of the office and meet people.

“When you can look someone straight in the eye, there is so much more synergy than when you're communicating via social media,” says Angie Pohlman, executive director of the Heights-Hillcrest Regional Chamber of Commerce. “You can start conversations on social media, but it's only when you meet someone face to face that you will really know if you want to continue a relationship and do business with that person.”

There are some things you can do — and some that you shouldn't — to make the most of in-person networking opportunities.

“Don’t try to sell people on yourself. No one likes attention hoarders or people who seem to have an inflated opinion of themselves. Take the opportunity to learn about others.”

— Angie Pohlman, executive director of the Heights-Hillcrest Regional Chamber of Commerce

1 Shine the spotlight, don’t stand in it. The quickest way to get to know someone is to get that person to introduce himself or herself. You stand a good chance of getting your conversation-mate to open up to you if you spend less time talking about yourself and more time asking about the other person, because it’s a simple fact: People like to talk about themselves.

This is where the “Tell me about yourself” wording is key to getting the conversation started. In contrast, talking nonstop about yourself is a quick way to repel others.

“Don’t try to sell people on yourself,” Pohlman says. “No one likes attention hoarders or people who seem to have an inflated opinion of themselves. Take the opportunity to learn about others.”

2 Ask for permission to give someone your card. You’re at a networking event to develop relationships that can lead to new business. You are not there to solicit business. As such, don’t assume that everyone you talk to wants or needs your business card. Instead, ask before handing someone your card.

“Don’t just say ‘Here’s my card,’” Zust says. “Start a conversation, get to know the person a little bit, feel out how things are going, and if it seems like a good opportunity, ask if you can give the person a card. It’s a subtle difference, but it’s not as aggressive or presumptive to ask if someone wants your card, and it makes the interaction a more positive one.”

3 Emphasize quality over quantity. Although you may find yourself sharing a reception room with several hundred people, you’re not necessarily trying to cast the widest possible net. Instead, identify several opportunities that appear to have promise, then work on cultivating those relationships.

“Have a goal of meeting one to three people that you really like,” Pohlman says. “Don’t set a goal of meeting 10 or 20 people. By trying to meet fewer people, you’ll help yourself break the ice with the people you do meet. You’ll be able to have a more relaxing, enjoyable conversation with those people, instead of feeling the pressure to jump from one person to another.”

4 Go as a group. If you are shy, or feel overwhelmed in large group settings, bring moral support in the form of a friend or associate. A companion can help you feel more at ease as you start mingling with the crowd.

“Once you’re at the event, agree to spend a certain amount of time together, split up for a period of time so that you can meet other people, then come back together later,” Zust says. “It’s an easier way to make yourself feel more comfortable with networking.”

And if you don’t have a companion, look for others at the event who appear to be alone.

“Often, they are relieved that someone is talking to them,” Zust says. “They are uncomfortable because they don’t know anybody, and now they’ve met you.”

5 Follow the crowd. People tend to congregate in certain areas at a networking event. Find those areas and mingle.

“I’ve found there are four primary areas where people convene,” Zust says. “They tend to hang out at the registration area, the bar, wherever there is food and what I’ll call the ‘chilling area,’ which is usually at the side of the room, where you take your drink and plate of food and just go to relax. If you gravitate toward those areas, it’s much easier to meet people.”

Meeting people at a networking function really isn’t much different from hanging out at a school dance when you were a teenager. The conversations are a lot more sophisticated now, but it still comes down to being polite, showing interest in others and finding common ground. In an era dominated by virtual communication, those are still critical skills to master.

“We’re human beings, and we still need the most intimate form of connection, which is face to face,” Zust says. “It’s always going to be that way. Nothing can replace it.” ●