

How Introverts Can Network With Ease

Starting out as a freelance writer, I attended a networking event for entrepreneurs. I thought, what better way to scout for clients, right? The only problem: I'm an introvert. Here's how the evening played out:

I ran through the files in my brain searching for something meaningful to say.

Nah, too boring, too stupid, too embarrassing.

Then I piped up with some version of:

"Hi, I'm Diane. I'm a freelance copywriter. I write copy for businesses and individuals. Here's my card. Take it. Take it! I'll stick it in your pocket. And here's another. Give it to a friend." Then I cased the joint looking for my next victim.

Okay, I wasn't that blatant. But pretty close. When I wasn't blabbing about myself and foisting cards on strangers, I stood tongue-tied with a fixed smile until the other person wandered away with great relief, or I broke out in a sweat and exited stage right, making a beeline for my car.

I'm not a skillful conversationalist.

My sister, on the other hand, is a brilliant conversationalist. She has scads of friends nationally and abroad—that's how good she is at conversing with strangers. I decided to study her technique, and boiled it down to this:

She asks questions.

That's it! 75 - 80 % of her conversation is questions.

"How's that short story going? Did you finish it? No? What's in the way? Have you thought about...?" and so on. 75 - 80 % of the time she's finding out about the other person, and 20 - 25% of the time she shares stories or relays information.

I'm the reverse. I spend 75 - 80 % of the time, maybe more, talking about, or thinking about, ME. I focus a measly 20%, maybe less, on the other person.

I thought, what if I flipped it? What if, at my next networking event, I approached someone and said:

"Hi, I'm Diane. What business are you in?"

"I designed an app for home delivery of vegan meals."

"No kidding! Do the meals arrive on the doorstep? How does that work? What kind of people use the app? Is it geared to millennials who work crazy-long hours in high tech? Or families? Or singles? How do you get the word out to people? How's that working for you?" And so on.

Now, I've made a personal connection. I'm gathering the kind of information I'd want to know if I was having a first meeting with a client. I'm finding out what this person's needs might be, and how I might serve him or her. And ya know what? It works!

Networking is about the other person, not me. The less I focus on myself, the more at ease I become. I never run out of things to say if I'm digging for information. It takes the pressure off of trying to find something enlightening to say.

I'll wind up the conversation with, "By the way, I'm a freelance copywriter. I think your app would make a terrific story. I'd love to help you get the word out. If you're interested, shoot me an email."

Then I exit stage right, jot down some notes about the person and his or her business, and follow up with a warm email.

"Hey, had a great time chatting with you at the mixer. I had a couple of ideas you might be interested in." or, "Here's a link to an article you might find useful."

Or I'll extend an invite to connect on LinkedIn.

I might not have an instant client, but I've started a relationship which might lead to a writing job, or referral, in the future.

Networking doesn't need to be a sweat-inducing ordeal that sends your back into spasms as soon as you step into the room.

Instead, it can be viewed as a game. Find out what the other person wrestles with, and come up with a creative way to help them out.

And do hand out two business cards at a time. Just in case the person knows someone who needs what you have to offer.