



How to Work a Room

As a B-School student, you will probably attend career conferences, job fairs and alumni networking events. It's not so easy to master the art of juggling a plate and drink in one hand while delivering an on-target elevator pitch. And for introverted job-seekers who prefer one-on-one meetings or more intimate conversations, the idea of needing to "work a room" to meet an influential new contact may seem overwhelming.

Despite this, succeeding at in-person networking is not out of reach. Knowing how to work a room can make all the difference in feeling more comfortable and creating a memorable first impression.

Follow these steps to eliminate the awkwardness when attending a networking event and emerge with new contacts.

Be Selective

You do not need to attend every networking event. Choose events based on who will be there and the type of contacts you can make. Look for events that will allow you to interact with the appropriate people, either by industry, profession or geographic location. Beyond the major career conferences, seek out relevant industry MeetUps, workshops, professional association meetings or hosted happy hours, presentations delivered by target company leaders, or alumni events held in desired.

Become a Sleuth

Before attending in-person events, find out who else plans to attend. This is easier than ever if you received an online invitation. Attending a professional networking event? Organizers likely used a social application to record responses and make them available to invitees. Colleagues and potential mentors may have listed themselves as attending, which provides easy access to click through their profiles to learn about their backgrounds and interests.

Learn whatever you can about the people you may meet. Narrow down some people you may want to meet and use all available tools to learn more about them. Start with a Google search. Have they or their organizations been in the news? Have they recently been quoted in a professional journal or online newsletter? Most people are flattered when new colleagues mention a quote or comment of theirs that received positive press. Doing so makes it clear you are on top of industry news, which never hurts.

Review LinkedIn profiles, Twitter streams and even Facebook pages owned by people you hope to meet in person. Focus first on professional information: where they attended school, where they worked, and review their professional bios, or LinkedIn summaries. (Don't forget to make sure you have a complete LinkedIn profile and a professional online presence in case anyone is researching you!)

Have a Conversation Starter

No one really wants to stand around exchanging elevator pitches... Think about what you enjoy discussing.

The idea is to get the conversation started by making small talk. Asking a light question makes it easy for the person to respond. Avoid starting a conversation with the very overused "what do you do?" Instead, warm up the conversation by asking something about the networking event, city, weather or even current events. Eventually the conversation will allow you to ask about the person's profession.

If you are attending a career conference or job fair, there is usually time allocated for networking. But if not, you can still take the initiative to network while waiting in line. You never know what you may learn from a fellow b-school student. ►



Be prepared to network with everyone who is attending an event. Consider these suggested conversation starters:

- Talk about food. What's the best restaurant in town?
- Ask about their hobbies or outside interests? If you are lucky, you'll share a hobby with the person you are meeting.
- Sports. Do you know what teams are playing that night? How about where to get tickets for events?
- Share a highlight from your recent vacation.
- Are you an avid reader? See if you share a similar interest in books.
- Did you just discover a new productivity app? Mention why you like it. People always appreciate learning about online resources and ways to make their lives easier and more efficient.

If you're meeting someone you've done research on and you discover the person enjoys fishing and you do, too, work the topic into the conversation. It's not necessary to say, "In researching your background, I noticed you enjoy fly fishing; so do I." Even in an age when it's easy to find out anything about other people, this might seem a bit invasive. Instead, ease into the topic by saying, "Wow...This weather is great for fishing. I hope it lasts until the weekend." The new contact will likely pick up the topic and presto—a natural conversation ensues.

You'll find many more conversation starters at the end of this material.

Survey the Room

Once you arrive at the event, note where the bar and food are located. People tend to gather in these areas making them great spots for starting a conversation with someone in line. You can also look for people who are standing alone and not already talking to someone. This is an easy way to engage someone in conversation plus it's a considerate, welcoming gesture that will be remembered. Most people feel uncomfortable attending an event alone, so by approaching them, you've helped alleviate the awkwardness. And finally, scan the crowd to see if you know anyone. Make sure to say a quick hello to people you know, but keep track of your time so you'll be able to meet more people at the event too.

Play Host

Another way to get into the networking mood at a group event is to play host! Think about what a host would do. If this was your event, you would want to make people feel comfortable. One way to do this is by introducing someone you've just met to a person you know at the event or even someone standing by themselves. Or you may notice the person you are talking with needs a drink. Offer to go with them to the bar to get one. During your conversation, you may suggest introducing them to someone in your network. Share why you believe they would benefit from meeting one another and what you think they have in common.

Buddy Up

Attending an event solo takes courage and determination. To ensure you don't back out of the event, and more importantly, that you have someone to talk to, invite a friend. You can either arrive together or meet each other there. Just set some ground rules. Agree that you are both going to the event to meet new people so you don't stand in the corner and talk with each other the whole time.

Set a Goal

You don't need to stay for the entire event. Set a goal to meet two or three new people, or if your intention was to meet someone specific, this can serve as your motivation. Once you've achieved your goal, you are free to leave, unless you are having a good time, which can unexpectedly happen. ►



How to Close a Conversation

Leaving a conversation can be awkward. But remember, the reason you are attending the event is to meet new people. And it's okay if you don't click with every person you meet. Find an excuse to exit from the conversation or explain that you would like to meet more people. If you do meet someone you would like to stay in touch with, be sure to ask for the person's contact information before you leave their side.

You can find ideas on what to say to leave a conversation at the end of this material.

Questions to Start a Conversation

Any Group Event

- "What brought you here today?"
- "How's your week going?"
- "Are you from the area?"
- "I can't believe how beautiful/cold/hot/rainy it is today."
- "That [food or beverage] looks great. Where did you find it?"
- "Do you have anything interesting planned for the weekend?"

At A Conference With Speakers

- "What did you think of the speaker?"
- "What part of the talk really resonated with you?"
- "What prompted you to come here today?"
- "Have you been to one of these before?"
- "What's been the best session for you?"
- "Who have you enjoyed the meeting so far?"
- "What session are you most looking forward to?"

At a Career Conference or Job Fair

- "Have you participated in events like this before? How does this one compare?"
- "Which company did you enjoy meeting so far?"





Ways to End a Conversation

- “It’s been great talking with you, but I really need to say hello to a few other people. Hope you enjoy the rest of the event.”
- “Thanks for the time. Seems like we have a lot in common. Can I send you a LinkedIn invitation?”
- “I don’t want to take up all your time, it was great meeting you!”
- “It’s been good speaking with you! I’ve got to make a quick call, please excuse me.”
- “It was great speaking with you. If I don’t run into you later, I hope to see you at another event soon.”
- “I’m going to grab another drink, but it was fantastic to meet you.”
- “Well, I think it’s time for me to head out. I would love to talk with you again, though. May I have your card?”