

# How to Network at Events

Throughout graduate school and the job search process you will encounter informal opportunities to talk, mingle, and connect with other professionals. This type of networking happens at socials, conferences, departmental lectures, career fairs, campus visits, and other events.

## Prepare and Practice

**ATTEND AS MANY RECEPTIONS** and networking events as possible to practice before it really counts.

Before attending any networking event, get organized and do your research. Try to find out who will be there and then try to find information about the other guests. LinkedIn is great for learning more about attendees.

Plan and practice how to introduce yourself. It's good to say your name, title, organization or program, and perhaps your reason for attending the event. Prepare a 10-second and a 60-second summary of your research, or other relevant details about yourself, depending on the event.

Bring a pen and a stack of business cards with you to networking events so you have a quick and convenient way to exchange contact information.

## Eating and Drinking

**EAT A SNACK** before the event so that you have time to focus on meeting people. Leave one hand free at all times for shaking hands or exchanging business cards. This means you might be only able to eat *or* drink at any one

time. Look for food that is easy to eat without utensils to minimize spilling and be ready to make introductions.

Be sure to circulate around the room. Many people will cluster near the food, but if your goal is to meet people, make an effort to move around the event space.

## Starting a Conversation

**MAKE EYE CONTACT** as you approach an individual or group. Consider looking for a group with a physical gap, indicating somebody just exited the group. At the appropriate time, shake hands and introduce yourself in a quick sentence. Smile! Wait to ask a question or start contributing

until you know what the group is talking about.

As it makes sense start short conversations about the event, current events (generally good to avoid politics and religion), hobbies, interests, or other topics. You can also discuss something you have in common with other guests – graduated from the same school, members of the same organization, or similar.

If it becomes clear a group doesn't want to include you, don't take it personally. Group members may be old friends. Find another group.

## Ask Open-Ended Questions!

**ASKING OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS** is a great way to keep a conversation going. Some examples are listed below, but consider developing your own set that you can use at different kinds of events.

- > **What brings you to this event?** Most people have an answer for this one, whatever the event.
- > **What first got you interested in \_\_\_?** This also works well in a variety of settings.
- > **What projects are you working on right now?** Works well in professional settings and can be modified for other arenas.

**FOCUS ON QUESTIONS THAT START WITH "HOW" AND "WHAT"** as they tend to require more than a "yes" or "no" answer.

If you have a hard time finding a group to enter, find other individuals in your situation and start your own group or make conversation with somebody at the refreshment table.

Remember that a positive, confident attitude goes a long way in social situations.

### Maintaining a Conversation

**PEOPLE LOVE TO TALK** about themselves so consider asking about work, vacations, and hobbies. Open-ended questions are excellent for continuing a conversation. Demonstrate your listening skills, both verbally and non-verbally (nodding, turning towards the speaker).

If you are in a larger group, ask questions that more than one person can respond to because this encourages a larger dialogue.

If you do not like to talk about yourself, prepare in advance one or two topics you would be comfortable talking about so that you have something to say when asked directly about yourself.

Notice when someone else is lingering nearby and welcome them to your group. Ask their name and introduce them. Avoid scanning the room while others are talking in your group as this signals your complete disinterest in those around you.

### Exiting a Conversation

**THERE ARE SEVERAL WAYS** to gracefully exit a conversation.

The first is to introduce someone else into the conversation, briefly summarize the conversation for the newcomer and then excuse yourself.

The second is to thank the person in the conversation while mentioning something specific you discussed (“it has been great talking to you about seahorses”) and share what you plan to do next, provided it is not the restroom (“however I set a goal for myself to meet two octopus researchers at this event”).

A third way doesn’t even require a plan. If you haven’t already exchanged business cards, you can say something like: “It was

nice meeting you. Can I have one of your business cards so I can keep in touch?” or “I’d love to connect with you on LinkedIn” as the case may be.

Whatever you say to end a conversation it should be polite, positive, and optimistic (“best of luck on your thesis defense next month”).

### After the Event

**WHAT YOU DO AFTER AN EVENT** matters as much as what you do during an event. Make notes on what you talked about with each person to remember for future correspondence.

Follow through on any promises you made at the event to connect on LinkedIn, provide an article, introduce someone to another contact, etc. Following up within the first few days is crucial for establishing a new professional connection because the context for meeting is still fresh in everyone’s mind. If you wait until weeks or months later a busy professional might not remember who you are.

## What to Wear and Nametag Etiquette

**WHEN IN DOUBT, GO FOR BUSINESS CASUAL** (pants or skirt with blouse, sweater, or collared shirt)

- > **Check an event’s website.** Some events have specific instructions or you can get clues from the photos of previous events. If you are still unsure, error on the side of more conservative and dressy.
- > **Minimize what you have to carry.** Professional-looking bags and briefcases are appropriate. Keep in mind, however, that you want to keep your hands free so you can shake hands.

**WHAT TO DO WITH NAMETAGS.** If not pre-printed, write your preferred name clearly. In Seattle people usually use just their first names. It is common for people to wear their nametag on their right side for easy viewing as they shake hands. When shaking hands try for a medium pressure grip, rather than limp or bone-crushing