

For Those Who are Uncomfortable With Networking

You know that visibility is crucial to your career, that promotions, choice assignments and great job offers go to those who know how to toot their own horns. Nevertheless, thoughts of small talk, business-card swapping and self-promotion leave you cold

Chances are, you're an introvert-someone who prefers introspection, ideas and privacy over interaction with others. While extroverts are energized by external events, you gain the most satisfaction from excelling at your work, not talking about it. Still, in an extroverted world, your competence means little if you're the only one who knows about it. Like background music, your contribution is invisible and is very likely to be taken for granted.

So what's an introvert to do? Luckily, the traditional strategies of networking are not the only ways to develop your professional reputation and roster of contacts. So you needn't try to fit into the extrovert's mold-you'll only end up feeling less adept. Instead, focus on what will work for your personality type.

Structure opportunities. "I don't even call my mother without a reason," confesses one introvert. So find a reason. "For introverts, the important thing about networking is for them to structure it, because it won't just happen naturally," says Linda Reid, leadership initiative manager for Levi Strauss & Co., who uses personality-type theory in her role as a career counselor.

That structure can be as simple as making specific appointments to meet with people and attending scheduled activities. Look for seminars and conferences with set agendas, rather than open-ended "networking" meetings. Discussing your reactions to the content of the agendas with others will eventually bring the conversation around to who you are and what you do, while eliminating some of the awkwardness of initial introductions.

Another way to structure introductions and define the purpose of your presence at an event is to volunteer to register other attendees. The added benefit to this is that it gives you a chance to ask everyone their name-which you can then match with a face. (Just be sure to wear your own name tag!)

Put it in writing. What a better vehicle for introverts to communicate with than the written

word? You have the potential to reach a wide audience from the comfort (and privacy) of your own home or office. Submitting articles to company newsletters or trade journals, sending interoffice memos and electronic mail, and writing letters all provide you with non confrontational opportunities to circulate your well-thought-out ideas.

If people see your name frequently and associate it with quality work, insightful messages and attention to detail you're giving them reasons to contact you. That way you can avoid having to initiate that awkward first contact. On the other hand, editing a house organ at your company will also provide you with structured opportunities to meet with organization's division heads and senior managers on a regular basis.

Develop presentation skills. Introverts can probably conquer their fear of formal presentations more quickly than they can their trepidation about informal chitchat. (Presenting to hundreds of people is often less intimidating to me than enduring one coffee break with a few.) That's because formal presentations put you in control of content you're familiar with, while informal networking situations leave you feeling more vulnerable and on the spot. And while presentations are not likely to be anxiety-free for anyone, they are particularly efficient way to communicate your ideas. In one speech, you can send your message out to 100 people-without interruption. Compare that to the unpredictable conversation patterns at a cocktail party.

Celebrate your strength. Finally, learn to celebrate your own gifts of depth and concentration. After a long day of being "on stage," rejuvenate yourself by spending some quiet time alone. You can go home and curl up with a good book or take a long quiet walk (I go running with my golden retriever), confident that your insight will eventually be recognized and that you developed the support system you need to survive in this extroverted world.

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