

The Four Most Common Networking Mistakes

Yahoo! HotJobs

By Caroline Levchuck

Take a tip from Miss Manners: Etiquette is important.

And perhaps nowhere more so than at networking events.

You may already know that networking events are one of the best ways to find job leads and expand your Rolodex. But attending events is only half the battle. You also need to know how to behave at them.

If you talk too much, say too little or arrive unprepared, you can ruin your chances to leave with a job lead.

This Ain't No Party

Remember why you're here.

The purpose of a networking event is to help you advance professionally. It's a social event -- but a professional one. Think of it as a conference social or a business dinner.

The cardinal rule of networking events: Never get drunk. We all remember what happened to Melanie Griffith in "Working Girl."

You want the people you meet to remember you as capable, competent and polished -- not as the guy or gal who was wearing a lampshade on their head at the end of the evening.

Dress appropriately. Err on the side of conservative and choose an outfit you could wear to a job interview. Your attire should say, "I'm a professional," not "I'm a party girl (or boy)."

After all, you're not at a party.

Do Your Homework

Don't arrive at a networking event without a plan of attack.

First, find out which person or organization is sponsoring the event. Next, see if there will be speakers, presenters or any special guests in attendance. Last, make a list of people you expect to be there and want to meet.

Do a little research on each of them. A little knowledge goes a long way. If you know something about the people you approach, it's much easier to start a conversation -- and keep it going.

Pitch In

Don't forget to prepare your elevator pitch.

You'll need it to introduce yourself to people at a networking event.

An elevator pitch is brief -- brief enough to share during an elevator ride. In your pitch, give a three-minute summary of who you are, your experience and abilities.

Practice your pitch before the networking event so that it'll sound natural. Be confident, but not pushy. Remember, a networking event isn't a formal interview. And don't forget to smile.

Quality, Not Quantity

Focus on the quality, not quantity, of your connections at networking events. You'll get better results by making a few good connections than by handing out dozens of business cards indiscriminately.

And first impressions matter, so mind your manners.

Always stay focused on the person you are talking to and maintain eye contact. Don't scan the room trying to decide whom you'll talk to next.

Also, show interest in the people you meet. You can make a great impression by asking a few thoughtful questions. Above all, be genuine and sincere.

A strong professional network is based on relationships, and it takes time to build a relationship.