



Financial Mail Women's Forum Blog #4: Networking events

"If you are going to go make the most of them"

Neil Munz-Jones published *The Reluctant Networker* in 2010. It has been featured in a number of leading publications such as *The Sunday Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *People Management* and *Good Practice*. In the fourth in a series of blogs Neil writes about ***tips for going to networking events***.

Events dominate peoples' thoughts about networking, usually raising difficult questions: Should I go at all? If so to which ones? What will I say? How will I break into an established group? How to I get out of a conversation that has gone on too long? When should I switch from social niceties to business? How do I approach the important people who look too busy to talk to me? In fact so many questions it is easy to talk yourself out of going at all!

Here is some advice, with the overall principles of

- 'if you are going to go, make the most of them'...
- ...and remember the principle in my 2nd blog "Develop a style that works for you"

Before you go

- Be selective. Focus on events that are likely to have people that you will want to network with; if you start going to events and they don't lead to anything useful you are likely to be put off; go to ones where you are likely to meet the same people, so that you can start to build a relationship with people that you meet more than once.
- Be clear on why you are going. Even though I now enjoy many of the ones I go to, I would not choose to go to them in my 'free time'. So I need to get something productive out of them such as new contacts or old contacts revived. So I prefer to have several conversations that are long enough to 'make a connection' (i.e. do we get on/want to keep in touch going forward and so we should exchange business cards), but not so long that I only have one or two. Saying hello to most of the room without really 'connecting' does not achieve my objectives (save that for the celebrities...).
- Consider going with a friend, but if you do, split up and meet people you don't know; introduce each other to interesting people you have met and leave together but remember this is a networking event, not a drink with a friend.
- Have some ice breakers prepared along the lines of "Hello, I'm xyz, do you know many people here?", "Where have you come from?", "What line of work are you in?" "What brings you to this event?". Think FLOR: Family, Location, Occupation, Recreation as good

topics of conversation for new people. I usually start with Location and Occupation before moving on to Family and Recreation (including holidays).

Once you are there

- If there is a delegate list, see if there is anyone you want to meet and go and find them; your hosts can help with introductions, so a “I’d really like to meet xyz, would you mind introducing me” should work.
- Be confident! Make eye contact, smile and look like you are a natural. There will be many others in the room not feeling 100% confident and in their element...it is not just you who may be feeling like that. If you look like you would rather be somewhere else, you are unlikely to meet many people and have useful conversations.
- When you turn up, you’ll need to start a conversation. If you are not a ‘regular’, it may be easier to talk to someone else on their own. It can be harder to break into an existing group, unless you know someone in the group already. As well as asking questions (remember FLOR), be prepared to talk about yourself and share information. Once you are more confident, you can ‘barge in’ on established groups in a polite way. Make sure you listen; people love to talk about themselves, so don’t just ask some questions (with sincerity!) but practice ‘active listening’, it’s a great way to build rapport.
- Don’t worry too much about rushing to talk about business if it does not make you feel comfortable. Keep it social and then if you need to talk business with someone you have met, consider asking for a follow up 1-2-1. If you have a ‘need’ (e.g. job seekers) say you’d like to ask their advice/pick their brains...i.e. a combination of flattery and not putting them under pressure.
- If you are already in a group talking, keep an eye out for people trying to join in. Turn your body to ‘let them in’ and in a break in the conversation, tell them what is being discussed and introduce yourself; this is a nice gesture that will be appreciated, especially by others who are not natural ‘event networkers’.
- How do you approach the really important people that look too busy to talk to you? Firstly do you have to talk to them...if they are that busy will they be willing/have time to help you? If you really do need to talk to them, think of an interesting/amusing ice-breaker (e.g. a female lawyer colleague usually made reference to her pink/yellow dress standing out in a mass of dark suits) and then be specific and bold about what you want to ask them.
- ‘Moving on’ to another conversation can be difficult. But remember this is a networking event, so it is ok to have lots of short conversations. This can be easier if you are in a group than in a 1-2-1 conversation, but if you have met some other people already, why not introduce the person you are talking to now to them. Here are some ‘exit’ lines you could try:

- “Will you excuse me, but I need to find/I’ve just seen xyz and I am keen to talk to him/her”
 - “It’s been a pleasure talking to you but we/I ought to go and mingle”
 - “I’d better let you/we ought to go and network”
 - If you are feeling really bold: “you must be bored talking to me” or “I’m bored now” ...both have been used in the past!!
- Selectively exchange business cards with people you enjoyed talking to. You don’t have to exchange cards with everyone. If they don’t have any cards, ask them to write their contact details on the back of a spare one of yours (but don’t then give it out to someone else!).

After the event

- If you take somebody’s business card, jot down on the back of the card some memorable details from your conversation (think FLOR). Then enter their contact details in your database and drop them an email the next day saying you enjoyed meeting and hope you can stay in touch. This makes it easier to get back in touch months or even years later. The memorable details you wrote down on the back of the card will help give you an ice-breaker when you get back in touch “So are you still doing xyz job?”. Also see if they are on LinkedIn and connect with them.

A final thought...set yourself a goal of speaking at an event that fits your profile once in a while. This may sound ambitious for a Reluctant Networker but when you think about it, what better way to raise your profile and have lots of people coming to talk to you after your talk. It is not as difficult as you might think. The people organizing events are always on the lookout for speakers. The key is to talk about something on which you are an expert and an enthusiast. Even if you do not like public speaking, giving a talk on something you know and love is quite easy and your passion and expertise will come across. It also helps to ‘self-select’ the people you speak to afterwards as they know something about you and have chosen to come and talk to you, so you may well have something in common.

About the book and the author:

Since publishing The Reluctant Networker Neil gives inspirational talks on networking for organisations such as The FT, The National Audit Office, The IOD, Barclaycard, The LexisNexis Women’s Networking Group and INSEAD as well as several professional services firms. He has appeared as a guest on BBC Radio and as a networking expert on The Guardian’s Live Q&A. In addition to giving talks on networking Neil runs mdj2 associates a consulting firm working with clients on the Retail sector.

See www.reluctantnetworker.com for more information. Copies can be purchased directly from the site or from Amazon and all other major online book stores as well as selected Waterstones stores.