

HOW TO NETWORK AT CONFERENCES

...WITHOUT BEING **AWKWARD.**



The Ultimate Guide
to Conference
Domination
(i.e. Not Standing in
a Corner Awkwardly)

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It Doesn't Have To Be Awkward.

If you downloaded this guide, you probably know you have some work to do when it comes to mastering your “networking” technique. Don’t worry -- you’re not alone.

Starting a conversation with someone through a computer screen? Sure, no problem — you can handle that. Walking into a room of crowded people, walking up to a stranger, and starting an intriguing conversation? No, no, no, no — you’d definitely rather stand in the corner by the snack table and pretend to be ridiculously busy on your iPhone so no one will attempt talking to you.

But that’d be a waste of the registration fees you already paid. So what do you do? Stand on the side and picture everyone in their underwear? Let’s be honest — that’s a little weird and will probably actually make you more uncomfortable.

There really is no need to get so worked up, we promise.

All you need to do is follow these simple tips and tricks about what to do before, during, and after your networking event, and you’ll be a networking pro in no time.



CONTENTS.

05 PREPARING FOR THE EVENT

12 EFFECTIVE NETWORKING
DURING THE EVENT

19 WHAT TO DO AFTER THE EVENT



01

CHAPTER

PREPARING FOR THE EVENT.



LEVERAGE SOCIAL CHANNELS

If you're a marketer, you're probably already great at making new connections on social media sites like Twitter and LinkedIn, which is much less scary than making connections in-person. So let's start there!

Twitter

Twitter is a fantastic resource for connecting with conference attendees ahead of time. Hashtags (#) are regularly used to facilitate conversations at events. For example, INBOUND 2014's official hashtag is [#INBOUND14](#). People attending this marketing conference can use the hashtag to tweet about the event, and find other people who are also talking about it on Twitter. Here's how you can use Twitter to find conference attendees ahead of time:



Tweet that you're attending! If you're a bit nervous about reaching out to other people on an individual basis, start by making it easy for other attendees to find you and reach out to you. For example, you can tweet:





“ So excited to go to
[#INBOUND14](#) in September!
Tweet at me if you'll be there,
too. ”

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-  **Search for the conference hashtag.** If other people are excited about the event and are tweeting about it, you should be able to find them if they're using the hashtag. Just do a Twitter search for the hashtag, such as #INBOUND14, to find other people talking about the event.
-  **Regularly check for new attendees.** Set up a Twitter feed in Tweetdeck, HootSuite, HubSpot, or whatever you use to monitor your Twitter feeds. Create a new stream that monitors the hashtag that promotes the event. This way you can keep up with the latest conversations that happen about your event.
-  **Create a Twitter list.** To keep yourself organized, create a twitter list of all of the attendees that you find. Title the list: "People Attending #INBOUND14" (substitute the appropriate hashtag) and make it public. This way, the people who you add to the list will see that you've added them to the list, making you look like a networking superstar. People love to follow leaders, so you'll open up your networking opportunities.
-  **Follow and tweet.** Review these people's bios and Twitter streams, and see if you have anything in common that you could chat about at the event. Then follow them, and send a tweet their way saying that you'll be at the event too and that you'd love to meet up.



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LinkedIn

If Twitter's the party of social media, LinkedIn is a proper luncheon. You may feel more comfortable connecting with other business professionals on LinkedIn, which is a bit more formal than a microblogging platform. Here's how you can use LinkedIn to prepare:

-  **Learn about people's backgrounds.** Sometimes you can't find out enough about a person's background from their Twitter feed, especially if all they tweet about is Game of Thrones. Use LinkedIn to search for the people you find on Twitter, and learn more about their professional background to see if you want to spend your time at the conference networking with them.
-  **Make more personal connections.** If there's someone with which you'd really like to network, sending them a connection invitation gives you a bit more space to explain why you'd like to meet up with them at the event. Sometimes, 140 characters just doesn't cut it.
-  **Send a private message.** On Twitter, you can only send a private Direct Message if the individual is following you back. On LinkedIn, you can use an invite in case you don't want the whole world to see your networking strategy. People who aren't very active on Twitter will also be more likely to see your LinkedIn invitation.

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Facebook

While you might not want to connect with strangers on Facebook (really, when's the last time you accepted a friend request from a stranger?), it could be a good way to find other people who are attending your event, or learn a bit more about them — if their profiles are public. Here's how you can use Facebook to prepare:

-  **Find the conference event page.** It's likely that the conference will have a dedicated event page. Use Facebook search to find the event, and then click “Attend” to add yourself to the roster of attendees.
-  **Write on the wall of the event.** Post on the wall of the event that you're looking for people in order to connect with them at the event. Make sure you include a some information about yourself, and the type of people you'd like to connect with. Provide a link to your LinkedIn profile in case people feel more comfortable connecting with you there.
-  **Compile a list of people you want to connect with.** Again, many people only use Facebook to connect with friends. In fact, messages sent from non-friends will go into the “Other” folder of your Facebook inbox — so people won't even know if you send them a message unless they specifically check this folder. Compile the names of people you want to reach out to, but make your connections on Twitter or LinkedIn.

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PREPARE YOUR ELEVATOR PITCH

You should also use the weeks you have prior to the event figuring out what you want to say to people. What are your goals of networking at the conference? What do you want to learn from other people? Then make sure you plan the following elements:



Explain your company. Come up with a sentence or two that quickly and accurately explains what your company does. Make sure it includes what the primary benefit is to your customers, and leave out unnecessary jargon that people new to the industry might not understand.



Explain your role. Be able to concisely explain your role at your company. This will help people you interact with understand how you might be able to help them individually. And it will make you look less silly, which is a nice perk.



Compile a list of questions. After exchanging introductions and niceties, the most awkward moment is when you don't know what to say next, and the two of you are just standing there... awkwardly... staring at the croissants you're holding. To prevent this scenario, have a list of stock questions ready to go that can be applied to anyone. On the next page, you'll find a list of sample questions you can ask.

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EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

“Where are you from?”

“How long have you been at XYZ company?”

“Where were you before joining XYZ company?”

“How did you become interested in XYZ industry?”

“What are you hoping to get out of this event?”

“What sessions are you most looking forward to?”

“Which have been your favorite sessions so far?”

“Will you be attending other conferences this year?”

“I’m trying to improve at XYZ -- what did you read to do so?”

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02

CHAPTER

EFFECTIVE NETWORKING DURING THE EVENT.



Now that you're at the event, some of the most valuable networking you can do will be on the spot — in addition to the meetings you've already set up. Here are some tips for networking at the event itself.

1. Know Your Networking Goals

Do you want to spread awareness about a new project you're starting? Do you want to meet an industry leader who can become a valuable mentor? Do you want to find potential new hires for open positions at your company? **Having a clear goal in mind will make networking less ambiguous and lead to more effective connections.**

First ask yourself: "Who do I want to meet, and why?" Certain event registration platforms like Eventbrite show the event's attendee list on the registration page. If a guest list like this is available, take a moment to scan it. See a person or company on the list you've been hoping to connect with? Have the LinkedIn app installed on your smart phone, and look up the guest's LinkedIn profile to learn a little bit more about them, and arrange to meet at the event.

Let's say you're the CMO of a successful lawn-mowing business. Your business could benefit from finding a new source of potential customers, so you figure a great way to do that would be to start building some [co-marketing relationships](#) that you can use to reach a new audience of potential customers. If this is the case, you may want to consider spending some of your time at the event seeking out people whose businesses are complementary to yours — perhaps home improvement vendors — with which you can build relationships that lead to possible co-marketing opportunities.

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2. Start a Conversation

Your first connection at an event is your gateway to meeting more people. Maybe they came with friends they can introduce you to, or maybe you'll decide to break into bigger groups together. Whoever you approach first, **relieve some of the awkwardness with informed, relevant conversation starters to get in the swing of things together.**

Approaching a big or small group can be intimidating, but with the right approach, you can join in on an existing conversation or start your own successfully. Ease into the evening by introducing yourself to one person who is also flying solo and looking for someone to talk to.

Read up on industry news and trends beforehand so you'll be prepared to spark conversation and ask for their thoughts on topics that are interesting to both of you. This is especially important if you're attending an event outside your industry.



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3. Introduce Yourself to Someone Who's a Big Deal

We sometimes walk into networking events with high hopes of meeting the CEO of a company we admire, or the author of a favorite book. We're so thrilled to be in the same place as them, but suddenly, you spot them across the room and become nervous, awkward, and — who knows — maybe even a little bit sweaty. So how can you successfully strike up a conversation with this mini-celebrity from your industry's People magazine without making a total fool of yourself?

Remember that you admire this person because you respect their thought leadership; **give them a chance to admire you, too, by sparking an interesting and relevant conversation.**

First and foremost, make sure you have purpose. Butting into their conversation to tell them you love their work or admire their approach to business will not invite stimulating conversation. In fact, it's more likely to evoke a simple "thank you." Consider what it is about this person that resonated with you, and tie it in to your work, projects, or philosophy. Approach them with confidence, introduce yourself not as a fan, but as an equal (**because you are**), and say something thought-provoking that they can relate to, like, "I loved your book on Inbound Marketing; I reference it all the time at work. You wrote it a couple years ago — is there anything you would add now that some time has passed?"

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4. Don't Let the Conversation Lose Steam

Often, we meet someone and exchange our name, company, job title, and where we grew up in about three minutes. Then we smile, look at the ground, and say something like, “I love your shirt.”

Smooth.

When the small talk is up, it's easy for the conversation to go south. Avoid this by making *them* the topic of conversation. You might be on the verge of an awkward silence at a networking event, but if you referenced a project you know they're working on, you'll likely be met with a genuine, “Let me tell you about that.”

Remember that the person you're talking to is in the same boat as you. They don't want the conversation to awkwardly fizzle out, either. And everyone loves to talk about themselves.

You may be thinking, “How can I make connections if we just talk about them the whole time?” Showing genuine interest in another person can say more about you than talking about yourself. Besides, if a person doesn't reciprocate the behavior and encourage you to tell them about yourself afterward, then they probably weren't a valuable connection to begin with. **Next time a conversation is flailing, ask for them to elaborate, and you'll find talking points you'll be able to expand on and run with.**

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5. Ask for Something Without Scaring Someone Off

The highlight of networking events we all fantasize about is leaving with a concrete exchange that will move our business or career forward. Maybe it's a job offer, getting an investor on board, locking down a recommendation letter, or landing a client you've been after for months. Whatever the highlight, it isn't going to fall in our lap. We can play all the right cards to set us up for a the big moment, but a time will come when we need to put ourselves out there and firmly express what we want. How can we do this without sounding aggressive?

Consider your answer to the classic job interview question "Why should we hire you over the other candidates?" You come up with a true, succinct, humble, and exemplary answer of why you are the right person for the job. Your approach to getting what you want from networking isn't all that different, except it's important to express your flexibility.

In her book *Lean In*, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg references a time a woman approached her asking for a job by asking what her core business problems were and how she could fix them. This combination of flexibility and confidence in getting the job done is a brilliant way to frame your next big ask. **Be firm on what you want, but be clear that what you want is mutually beneficial.**

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6. Exit a Conversation Gracefully

It's important to remember that networking isn't like speed-dating. The goal isn't to meet as many people as you can — it's to make valuable connections. While it's important not to rush through conversations for this reason, there are times when we need to jump ship. Whether you're chatting with someone who won't let you get a word in or someone who is wasting time whining about their boss, you should still be polite when ending the conversation.

If there's a lull in conversation, say, "Please let me know how that project goes, I'd love to see it and hear how it turns out." This will show you were engaged, and though it ends the conversation in the moment, they won't feel offended. Or ask them, "Have you seen anyone from [company name] tonight? I've been meaning to chat with them." This will kindly express that it's important to you to expand your network. **In the future, if you need to get out of a tortorous conversation, end the discussion in the moment, but keep it feeling open-ended for the future.**

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03

CHAPTER

WHAT TO DO AFTER THE EVENT.



FOLLOW UP WITH YOUR CONNECTIONS!

After the event, follow up with your new contacts! Remind them who you are and resurface any important events or topics you chatted about. Following up with a personal connection helps you differentiate and solidify the relationship.



Connect soon after the event. To build a strong relationship, it's always good to strike while the iron's hot. The sooner you follow up with them, the more likely your connections will remember the conversations you had at the event.



Connect with your new contacts on LinkedIn. Chances are, you got their business card, so that will make it easy to find them on LinkedIn. It's best to do this soon after the event when your conversation is still fresh in both of your minds. One tip on remembering who's who: Write a little note on their business cards to remind yourself of what you talked about, and include that info in your connection message.



Further those relationships. Consider reaching out to any mutual contacts you and your new connection have. They may be able to offer you even more advice about how to further develop your new relationship.

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Send relevant links. Send compelling articles that relates to your conversation provides your new connections with some value. For example, you could say, “We talked about inbound marketing for a few minutes. I read this article the other day and I thought you’d enjoy it!”



Exhale. You did it! Congratulations on overcoming your social anxieties and networking like a pro.

Plan on attending a networking event soon? Leave awkwardness at the door by walking in with full confidence. Whether wearing your favorite shirt, listening to “Can’t Touch This” on the way out the door, or being on top of your industry news puts you in top form, remember the outcome of the evening is up to you.

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