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How to network without being fake, cheesy, pushy or smarmy

Sarah Beckham, Life Guide

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If your New Year's resolutions include things like finding a new job or growing your business, everyone is probably telling you to get out there and start networking. But that might leave you feeling a little, well, smarmy. Networking means you have to be pushy, or fake, or use people, right?

Actually, no. Ask some of Austin's most gifted connectors for their tips on networking, and you won't hear anything about how to fake a smile or never take no for an answer or only schmooze with powerful people. Instead, the themes that surface over and over come down to a few key points that center on kindness and community.

1. Be generous. "I'm a firm believer that the more you give, the more you receive," says Renée Peterson Trudeau. She's a career and life balance coach and speaker, president of Career Strategists and author ("The Mother's Guide to Self-Renewal"). "This practice has had a huge impact on the success of my two businesses."

Thom Singer, an author (see box, back page), speaker and consultant, agrees, saying that investing in the success of others is the best investment you can make in your own success.

"In general, people love to help those who are known as givers, but are not as thrilled to assist those viewed as takers," he says. So go ahead and give that informational interview, make that introduction, e-mail that helpful article, even when it's not clear yet what the other person can do for you. It sounds like a paradox, but if you help without the expectation of payback, you're more likely to benefit in the long run.

2. Be nice. When you're networking, of course you want to talk about yourself — maybe you're excited to tell people about your small business and why they should be customers, or about why their friend in your field should hire you. But don't forget about the importance of listening. It's not only the nice thing to do, it's also what will help you more in the long run, Singer says.

Ask people about their careers, their families, their hobbies. "When you show interest in others, they will feel connected to you," he says. We already know that generosity is the name of the game in networking, and learning about others helps you find ways to help them. "Nothing will make you more interesting to them than when you connect them to their own success," Singer says.

You're not going to have these meaningful conversations if you show up to events late and then dash off, says Patti DeNucci,



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owner of DeNucci & Co. referral and advisory service.

"This sends numerous signals, and none of them attractive or positive: you are habitually late or can't manage your time; you don't really want to be there; you don't want to engage; your schedule is so important that you just want to make an appearance; you have other, more important places to be," she says.

3. Be committed. It's better to be deeply involved in three or four business groups than to join scads, but only drop in on each occasionally, Singer says. That's no way to develop strong relationships. "If you cannot be there consistently, why would you think others will find you reliable?" he says.

Similarly, going to a networking event isn't about working the room and introducing yourself dozens of times. Ann Daly, a speaker, life coach and author ("A Year of Clarity: The Monthly Guide for Women"), says what really counts is the depth of the connections you make. "I count an event a success if I leave having initiated a single meaningful relationship," she says.

And as you make new connections, don't forget to keep nurturing the old ones, Daly and Trudeau say. "Think long term," Trudeau says. "The art of networking is about building long-term relationships, not looking for quick job or business leads.

4. Be real. If you're not being yourself, you're going to get found out, especially now in the age of social media, Trudeau says. "People can get turned off really easily if you're coming across as inauthentic or self-serving," she says. "Pause before you post and be mindful about how you're coming across to others."

Being real means not dodging topics that might seem "forbidden" in the context of networking, Singer says. "Many people say you can never talk religion or politics, but these are important parts of our world," he says. "To avoid them totally can make for shallow relationships." The important thing is just to show respect for others' views and not try to discredit them or change their minds. "Have humility in regards to your own political and religious views, and you can navigate conversations on these topics and establish respect with people of differing affiliations," he says.

5. Be happy. "If you can exude a steady flow of positive energy in a consistent, engaging and authentic way — in other words, if you truly feel happy, blessed and positive most of the time — people pick up on that and will be naturally drawn to you," DeNucci says. A key word here is "authentic": DeNucci says she'd rather stay home from an event if she's in a bad mood instead of going out and trying to fake it.

It also helps to lighten up a little, Daly says. "The more serious you are about 'networking,' the more desperate you appear," she says. "And desperate is just not that appealing. You're away from work, eating or imbibing, meeting interesting people. Enjoy yourself."

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