

Networking for the Terminally Shy

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It's like mixing oil and water: You love the idea of having your own business, but the thought of talking to strangers about your company has you running for cover. And even if you operate primarily online, you still need to interact with individuals in person from time to time.

Is there hope for the terminally shy in the entrepreneurial realm?

Yes, and no. If you duck for cover every time someone asks you to explain your solo business, you're doomed. Yet even the most outgoing entrepreneur has days when he or she just wants to fade into the beige carpeted walls of the hotel ballroom as a networking event drones on (and on and on).

What keeps successful entrepreneurs powered up? They know how to shift discomfort into action. And even if you're painfully shy, you can learn how to do this power shift, too.

The trick is to focus outwardly, instead of on yourself. When faced with participating in a networking event or other gathering, here are some tips to help you not only to survive, but also to thrive, in this atmosphere.

1. Volunteer to be a greeter.

Pitch in to be the one who welcomes people at the door. You get to say just a few words to everyone, and people will perceive you as friendly, which is half the battle. By the end of the night you'll have met nearly every single person in the room. Best of all, you don't need to be particularly outgoing -- and these are non-stressful encounters. All you need is a warm smile, and a few phrases: "Registration is over there, beverages are on the left, we're glad you're here...." It also frames you as a person "in the know," since you will have interacted with nearly every person at the event.

2. Practice a few interview questions.

Face it, most people enjoy talking about themselves. This is particularly true of entrepreneurs. If making small talk is not one of your strengths -- or on your list of all-time favorite activities -- then take on the role of interviewer instead. Prepare a series of questions you might ask any of the individuals attending the event. How did you get started? What have you found most challenging? Where would you like to take your business in the next 6 months? These types of questions are great fire-starters for interesting conversations.

3. Avoid asking yes/no questions.

We've all experienced that awkward moment in a conversation when neither party knows how to continue the verbal exchange. You can avoid this numbing silence by making sure the questions you ask can't be easily answered by a simple "yes" or "no." Or, if the person keeps responding to your questions in one- or two-word answers, smile and say: "Hmmm, that's interesting. Why do you feel that way?"

4. Ask questions about the event.

If you're struggling to find topics in common, you can always refer back to the subject of the event. For example, you might ask how the other person(s) are connected with the group, or what they thought of the speaker or program. Often there is more commonality than you might expect. After all, you've all gathered with some similar goals in mind.

5. Realize that everyone has a shy side.

Not every conversation has to be stellar. Sometimes the energy just doesn't "click." Or you might be tired or preoccupied with other issues. Rather than criticize yourself on your lack of social skills, just let it slide and know that there will be endless other encounters -- including ones in which you'll shine.

Most of all, accept that conversational abilities are a learned skill, not a genetic trait bestowed on every person at birth. It comes with practice and experience. By stretching a little bit in every situation, you'll be pleasantly surprised how easy (or at least more bearable) walking into a roomful of strangers can become. Be ready to meet 138 of your potential new best friends!