

Networking During the Holidays

By Gail Martin

You might be tempted to put your networking on hold during the holiday season, but don't give in to temptation. The truth is, holiday networking can be extremely effective—if it's handled properly. Here are some tips on how to make the most of your holiday socializing without committing any etiquette flubs.

#1 Carry your cards everywhere. I do mean everywhere. You never know when you'll strike up a good conversation, and you want to be able to continue the discussion after the party, so keep your cards handy.

#2 Don't push your cards. Seem like a contradiction to have cards handy but not push them? Not really. Holiday socializing has a veneer of being non-business, when everyone knows that it's just business acting low-key. Don't greet everyone you meet with a card or feel that you must end every conversation with a card exchange. On the other hand, when you really connect with someone, you'll want to be able to swap cards.

#3 Never forget that business-related holiday parties are business-related. Whether it's at the office, after-hours or through your professional association, never forget that business parties are always about business. It's not the time to let your hair down, tell everyone how depressed you are about your finances or your job search, or get tipsy. Always show yourself to be professional.

#4 Take a low-key approach to talking about work. Don't lead with a work-related topic. Trust that in the course of a conversation between two business people, work will come up. Be the one to ask questions and really listen to the answers. That's where you'll find the leads.

#5 Look for ways to help. Yes, you've got your agenda of what you want out of the parties you attend. But if you try to push that agenda, you'll look boorish. Instead, remember that it's the season of giving and look for ways you can help the people you chat with. Pass referrals, offer a recommendation, make connections. It gives them a reason to follow up with you and leaves a positive memory.

#6 Don't assume everyone is on vacation. There are lots of reasons people are in the office during the holidays. They may celebrate a different holiday, and so December is just another month for them. They may not have a lot of family obligations, or they just may need to get caught up. Some managers refuse to take time off themselves to allow employees to be out of the office. This can be a great time to reach elusive contacts via phone, email and social media.

#7 Make the most of social media. Many people will take some time off over the holidays, and when they do, they're likely to be on social media. This is a great time to chat with long-distance friends and business connections on Facebook and LinkedIn. Just make sure any holiday photos you post show you at your professional best.

#8 Say thank you. Even if you can't afford to send all of your clients a physical gift, take the time to send a mailed or emailed holiday card expressing your appreciation for the clients, vendors, referral sources and supporters in your life. If possible, offer a free digital download "gift" as a token of appreciation.

#9 Look for diamonds in your own back yard. Many neighborhoods, houses of worship, social groups and volunteer organizations host holiday get-togethers. Remember that many of the attendees at these events are professionals like you—people who might be able to help you connect, or whom you can help with a referral. I know of a man who has done several million dollars of business with the other fathers in his young son's play group! Opportunities are everywhere.

#10 Network with your internal "board of directors." Think of the people—past and present, alive and dead—who have inspired you. They may be relatives, teachers, or people whom you know only through their biographies. Choose ten of these people as your internal "board of directors" and spend time thinking about what advice they would give you in your current situation. Yes, it's only your imagination, but when you internalize the values and wisdom of the mentors in your life, you'll be amazed what insights you can gain by calling their memory to mind and asking your questions.

By shifting gears with your holiday networking, it's possible to have a social, enjoyable season while not abandoning the chance to make progress on your goals. Take advantage of these holiday networking tips to have a sparkling New Year!

Gail Z. Martin owns DreamSpinner Communications and helps companies and solo professionals in the U.S. and Canada improve their marketing results in 30 days. Gail has an MBA in marketing and over 20 years of corporate and non-profit experience at senior executive levels. Gail hosts the Shared Dreams Marketing Podcast. She's the author of 30 Days to Social Media Success and The Thrifty Author's Guide to Launching Your Book. Find her online at www.GailMartinMarketing.com, on Twitter @GailMartinPR and check out her Facebook page at 30 Day Results Guide.