How To Work A Room™

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The art of building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships.

It's 6:50 a.m. at an early-riser business-and-technology conference at the Museum of Science in Boston. A model of Skylab hangs from the high ceiling of the upper concourse, giving the room a dreamy feeling. The attendees, a mix of about 750 business people, entrepreneurs, techies and venture capitalists, have come to scout clients, investors, or jobs.

That's certainly what drew Diane Darling. Author of The Networking Survival Guide, Darling is a corporate consultant, business school lecturer, and sought after as an expert in networking. As the conference begins, she straightens her name tag, pops a mint and strides the crowd.

1 Don't go in cold

A week before, Darling researches the event on the Web to get a sense of the audience. "That way I could do a little research on people I want to meet and use that information to break the ice with them," she explains. "Are these people entrepreneurs? CEOs? VCs? I try to know as much as I can about the crowd before going."

2 Travel light

Darling wears a tasteful red jacket. "There are a bazillion blue suits here. I stand out in this jacket—but not in a bad way." She carries a small leather portfolio about twice the size of a wallet, with two pockets: One for business cards coming in, the other for cards going out. No fumbling.

3 Walk the walk

She walks through the concourse confidently, smiling. "Powerful people come to these events because they want to meet other skilled, talented people. So carry yourself accordingly. Don't fold your arms. Look like you are having a good time."

4 Start with breakfast

Darling first heads to the long breakfast table—but not because she's hungry. "People tend to be very accessible around the food. Talking and eating go together. It's a great way to get started at an event," says Darling, who carries her orange juice in her left hand so she can shake with her right.

5 Who's who

Darling circles the room once to scan names into her memory, giving her an idea of who's in the room before she picks her targets. "Don't read name tags while talking to people. Always maintain eye contact." Besides, sideways glances at name tags make you look furtive and shifty.

6 Approach VIPs first

Darling darts over to one of the morning's guest speakers, a Harvard Business School professor, a good 15 minutes before his presentation starts. "Keynote speakers love to talk and can be great contacts, but after they give their speeches they're always swamped."

7 Spot the lone wolves

The room is crowded, so Darling next looks for people who are standing alone. "It's harder to integrate into a group. Besides, individual contact is best; one-on-one makes for the most effective networking. Just make sure you smile as you approach."

8 "And you are?"

She approaches a man near the podium and asks his connection to the event, host, speaker, Museum of Science, etc. The goal is to ask others about themselves so you can connect to their interests and lives. When asked about herself she says, "I'm with Effective Networking — we help companies and people figure out where to network and refine their networking skills. My name is Diane Darling." She says her name at the end so he's more likely to remember it.

9 Press the flesh

On her approach, she's the first to extend her hand. "It's an old protocol, a sign that you're eager to interact," she says later. Also: Make sure to shake hands good-bye, especially if you're a woman. "It's not a natural part of a woman's repertoire of body language, as it is for men."

10 Be curious

While talking with strangers Darling asks open-ended questions to assess right off whether they'll be of any help. "Don't go into a polished 20-second commercial about yourself. Real leaders are curious. You're trying to pass the test as a personable human being first and foremost."

11 Card exchange

Darling has her cards readily available in her right pocket so they're easy to exchange. She puts cards she receives in her left pocket so they don't get mixed up.

12 Get an introduction

After traversing the room twice, she spots the conference moderator, a player in the Boston media world. He's alone drinking coffee, but rather than approaching him solo she enlists a mutual acquaintance to give her an introduction. "An intro is like an implicit endorsement, and the next time we meet, there will be that association and that context."

13 Give and take

The moderator mentions that he's looking to get in touch with a professor at MIT who Darling happens to know. She offers to call the professor as a way of introduction. "Always try to be a connector, the person who brings people together," she says. This not only makes Darling look well-connected, it may also make the moderator want to return her favor.

14 It's a wrap

After three hours, Darling has talked with around two dozen new contacts. She leaves the conference with plans to call these leads in the next week. "Remember, you're not there to close deals or get a job. You're there to get the right to follow-up with a phone call or a meeting over coffee. Even one contact like that makes the whole day worthwhile."

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