



The Art of Mingling & Networking

By Katherine Meeks

Being a Toastmaster involves more than being able to make a formal speech. How we communicate **informally** at events is equally important to both our business and social connections. In fact, grasping the art of mingling may be a bigger key to our overall success in life than giving speeches. That is why there is always an opportunity to mingle informally with other Toastmasters before, after or during a break in the planned events of the evening.

Do you avoid occasions where you think you may not know many – or any – of the people? Do you tend to speak only to those you already know or wait for an introduction? If so, you may be holding yourself back from some interesting and beneficial opportunities. Consider that you may also deprive others as well: meeting you would be interesting and beneficial for them; your interests and your businesses may mesh – indeed, the fact that you are both attending the same event suggests this is probable.

But for many of us, it's not so easy.

As a speech coach for diplomats, I receive invitations from clients to their diplomatic receptions, usually on a country's national holiday. I used to dread these affairs, wondering what in the world I was going to say to people I didn't know and presumably had nothing in common with. "I'm Kathy Meeks, who the #\$\$ are you?" was clearly inappropriate, although it accurately reflected my panicked thoughts. More suave approaches did not immediately occur to me.

However, at the last event I attended (after a few years of this), I suddenly realized I had no qualms anymore about approaching and mingling with strangers at events. It had even become fun.

Make the best of informal speaking opportunities in social settings.

For one thing, I realized that everyone can be affected by this nervousness. Diplomats, like the rest of us, can feel ill at ease at special events. They often attend with a colleague from the same consulate and end up talking to each other a good portion of the time. So, even diplomats – people who presumably socialize for a living – can be stiff and uncomfortable and not always know the right thing to say. I noticed people are glad when others take the initiative.

Here are some other things I've learned:

- **A person standing alone, or a couple not actively engaged in conversation are good places to start.** Worried about an opening line? Try "My name is _____." Smile and stick out your hand. The other person will do the same. Even if you stop here, the other person will usually pick up the ball.
- **Another place to start a conversation is in the food line, at the hors d'oeuvres table or buffet, or when you are seated near someone.** What to talk about? Start with what linguists call the "here and now." This means basically what is in front of you and the other person at this moment. That means the food ("Have you tried this?" "Is it spicy?" "Do you know what it's called?"), the weather, the venue, the entertainment, the speeches, the view, something going on with the city you're in. These are all good starts.
- **You may also approach a small group.** With a small group, stand in a noncommittal way on the periphery occupying yourself with your drink or food, as if you just happened to be standing there. Listen and then move closer. You will be able to tell by the body language if they are engaged in a closed conversation (they don't eventually



open toward you at all), in which case you should move on. If not, continue to listen for a while, show interest in the conversation, and at some point make a relevant remark, or better yet, ask a relevant question. Most likely at some point the group will regroup into new formations and conversations, and you will have a chance to follow up with those you found interesting.

- **You can ask about the other person's connection to the individual or organization hosting the event.** ("How did you get interested in Toastmasters?" "Do you work for the Hungarian Consulate?") You can ask about the person's career. A good follow-up question to that is, "How did you become interested in that?" or "How did you find your way into that field?"

- **Try to find something in common.** "Oh, you're a college teacher? My daughter is attending Baruch College. Do you know it?"

- **Be pleasant and curious.** Ask questions but try not to pry or interrogate. Try complimenting the other person on something he or she is wearing or ask a question about it.

- **Avoid negative comments or topics with people you don't know well.** Complaining and negativity make a bad first impression. Moreover, a snide remark about the food, the ice sculpture or the entertainment can backfire when it turns out you are talking to the person who recommended the caterer or the sister of the entertainer. On the other hand, shared adversity (a bottleneck, a misadjusted microphone or some planning oversight) can be a topic to bond on, if you approach it in a good-natured way.

- At large social events, such as diplomatic receptions and conferences, many people are not only socializing, but

also working – networking and making important contacts. Therefore **it's important for both you and the other person to move on after a short conversation.**

Watch body language. Don't glue yourself to one person. An unspoken convention is a time limit of about five minutes on conversations. You can extend this time limit if you are talking about something that is of strong interest to both of you, but be careful even then, and be very aware of body language. To disengage, after about five minutes, or when there is a pause in the conversation, you can say something like, "It's been nice talking to you," and then move on with a smile. You can make a perfunctory comment about getting food or drink, but this is not often necessary. Everyone realizes that people are there to network and mingle. If you really seem to have a lot in common, you can agree to meet up later at the event to talk a little more.

- **Bring a number of business cards, whether the event is social or business or a combination of both.** Exchanging business cards is common and it is easy to follow up later by phone or by e-mail. An exchange of business cards also facilitates name recall, and jogs your memory as to their connection. If someone doesn't have a card, you can always write the person's name and connection on the back of one of yours. If someone offers you a card, you don't have to reciprocate – just say apologetically that you don't have any on you at the moment. These exchanges are polite gestures, which may or may not be followed up.

Mingling and networking create new connections and new possibilities. This is what communication skills are about. Keep in mind that even if a connection is not followed up, an exchange can still have an important effect. I have heard people recall something that was said at an event years earlier by a person they had never seen again.

Whether it's an idea, a job lead, a new way of looking at something, a social connection or even just an interesting or pleasant moment, it's worth it. It could be a piece of news – I've shared information about Toastmasters at other events, and people were grateful. Even if none of the above occur (which is sometimes the case) it's still worthwhile as an attempt to hone your mingling and networking skills. Pretty soon you will be the one smoothing the way for those who feel less confident in this area, smoothing over others' faux pas (believe it or not, I once did that for a diplomat!), and giving others tips and encouragement.

By honing your networking skills, you pull others in a circle of connection as well as enlarge your own life – both in Toastmasters and outside. **T**

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When Networking Isn't Working...

By Craig Harrison, DTM

Use Your Toastmasters Training

I attend a variety of networking events and marvel at the basic and banal mistakes I see would-be networkers making. If only they would join Toastmasters.

Professional networking is about meeting new people, letting them meet you, and prospecting for sales, contracts, clients and more. Effective networking expands your circle of contacts, and by extension, your sphere of influence. Ineffective networking tires you out and discourages you by its lack of productivity. Worse yet, you can actually leave a bad impression with strangers. With practice and know-how your Toastmasters training gives you the edge in networking situations. But before you congratulate yourself, beware the following networking mistakes:

Poor networkers...

■ **Mumble!** A mumble is a speaking stumble. People mumble their names, their occupation and their titles all the time. Your name is irrelevant if we can't hear it. You've been saying your name all your life so you may be bored with it, yet we may hear it only once. State your name clearly, slowly and in a way others can repeat and remember it. It's your lifeline to contact. Take care in stating it.

Eight mistakes networkers make.

■ **Fail to emphasize the benefits of what they do.**

Remarkably, too many salespeople still focus on the features of their products and services instead of the end results. Customers buy benefits, solutions and outcomes. Speak their language by focusing on what you can do *for them*, not what *you* can do or how you do it. Example: Project managers help companies save time and money (two benefits) through expertly managing projects and people (features).

■ **Are stuck in a monotone delivery.** If you can't convey your qualifications, passion and your product or service's



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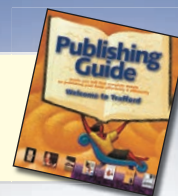
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Networking From A to Z

Arrive early for best results.

Be a good listener.

Clearly enunciate (your name, your words, your sentences).

Don't interrupt.

Exude confidence in your communication and how you carry yourself.

Focus on your conversational partner (not those around him or her).

Gather information about your conversational partner.

Help your listener remember you by what you say and how you say it.

Inquire about them. It's all about them.

Jump-start conversations with questions, compliments or provocative statements.

Know how you can best help others.

Listen actively (through the use of using gestures, facial expressions, body language).

Make and keep eye contact.

Never crowd your networking associates...respect their personal space.

Open-ended questions generate valuable insights.

Presentation skills matter! Polish yours.

Questions keep your dialog going. When it stalls, ask more.

Respect others' goals by fostering their success as well as your own.

Study non-verbal cues of your listener: do they agree, care, understand?

Table Topics help sharpen your small-talk and impromptu speaking skills. Participate!

Uncover their burdens, pain or problems that you can solve.

Value their time by not monopolizing it.

Write a thank-you note or e-mail to follow up with strangers you meet.

X is a variable whose value is unknown. Get to know others to appreciate their true value.

You are unique. Showcase your uniqueness through your style, what you say and do.

Zzzzz. What they'll do if you can't keep 'em awake with mutually beneficial conversation!

viability in 30 seconds, you've lost the opportunity. Use vocal variety, intonation and enthusiasm to speak confidently about yourself, your products and services.

■ **'Spiel' too long.** Networking is not speechmaking. You can't recite a resumé, tell your life story or otherwise drone on. Aimless rambling suggests you're not a focused professional. Showcase your communication skills by introducing yourself succinctly and asking precise questions to glean a few details about the other person. Keep it short and sweet! Think: *Very short Table Topic*.

■ **Get lost in mixed messages.** Is there is an inconsistency between what you say and what you do? Your card may say one thing about you, your clothing suggests something else and your language and vocabulary further confounds strangers in pinpointing who you are, what you are about and your competency level. Strive to send consistent mes-

sages verbally, non-verbally, and in your collateral materials and correspondence. When everything works together, the sum is greater than its parts.

■ **Neglect to mind their manners.** Bad networkers can't make small talk, don't show an ability to exchange pleasantries, and they interrupt others. Can you gracefully engage and disengage from conversations? Are your questions intrusive and your answers curt? Are you showing proper respect for the stranger you've just met, or are you singing opera? If so, your tune is painfully familiar: It's "Me-Me-Me-Me-Me!"

■ **Sling slang.** Many networkers profess to have excellent communication skills yet use slang or mispronounce big words when little words are better. Beware the use of contractions, excessive acronyms and name-dropping. Don't tell us what you're *gonna* do! I would like to hear what you are *going to* do instead.

■ **Disrespect the Tao of Networking.** People who are friendly to those they believe can help them, yet rude to those they believe can't help them, disrespect networking. I've heard people disparage the last person they met while conversing with me. I hesitated to let them go for fear of what they would say about me to the next person! That's antithetical to the spirit of networking and is simply rude.

One networker took my card and, in front of me, wrote the letter A on it, and boasted he was "putting me in his A list." Let's just say he was clearly the biggest A I met that night! Learn from the Japanese culture, which respects the business card as an extension of the individual it represents. Don't write on it in front of others, read and react to it with proper respect, and yours will be similarly received.

A Word About Networking and Club Meeting Etiquette

Over my dozen-plus years in Toastmasters, I've witnessed a number of members join clubs *solely* for purposes of networking and building their business from within Toastmasters clubs. They are blatant in their intent to turn club members into customers and clients. This casts a pall over the club experience.

There is a hierarchy of purpose in Toastmasters that places improving communication and leadership skills at the top. Building healthy, mutually beneficial relationships can also occur over time, but beware of putting your business before the needs and desires of other members, and especially of overtly selling from the lectern.

Nobody wants to be pressured to buy from a club member. We're there in a non-threatening environment to learn, be vulnerable and support each other emotionally. Be tasteful about promoting your business, or prospecting for customers and clients in Toastmasters meetings, and always defer to the wishes of your clubmates. **T**

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