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Networking at Christmas time

By **Jack Downton**

The demands of Christmas seem to get more and more intense each year: there are presents to buy, nativities to attend, and that oversized turkey to cook. With all this going on, do you really want to go to yet another work-related Christmas party?

As the economy gets more and more depressing than receiving socks on Christmas Day, networking can prove a great opportunity to put you in contact with people that may just come in useful – both now and in the years ahead.

Whilst some have a natural gift for ‘working the room’, many accountants dread networking events and would rather kiss Aunt Mildred under the mistletoe than talk to a room full of strangers.

Yet with a few tips, and a bit of practice, any accountant can improve their networking skills and approach the next corporate event keenly and confidently.

Do your homework

The accountants that I have trained are often surprised to learn that preparation is the key to success to becoming a successful networker: a little bit of homework now can pay big dividends later. Just as planning and foresight is needed for your day to day work, networking too greatly benefits if you have in mind objectives of what you want to achieve. By simply turning up, you don’t have a focus, and so the result is standing on your own, eating mince pies and achieving little. Yet by deciding what you want to achieve before these types of events, you do leave with a lots of useful business cards.

Look the part

In order to impress a crowd at a corporate event, you will need to create the right impression. Therefore, as you arrive, it is worthwhile checking your appearance in a mirror before you enter the room. People can form an initial impression within 10 seconds of meeting someone, so having arrived in a hurry straight after work is no excuse for not looking presentable.

As you enter the room, smile and make eye contact with those in the room. This is engaging, gives you an aura of confidence and gives the appearance of approachability. Have in your mind some suitable ‘ice breakers’ to kick start conversations: the amount of people at the event, the size of the room, anything to initiate conversation.

Choose your target

When choosing who to approach, consider carefully who to move in on – those on their own might be on their own for a good reason; similarly, a clique of two might not be welcoming to a third party. A group of three or more might be the best option, and you should approach with eye contact the member of the group you judge as leading the conversation.

In conversation, use people's names as soon as you hear them. If names are not offered, don't be hesitant in asking for people's names, as asking for names too late in the conversation is often awkward.

Before discussing the type of accountancy you're involved in, or the firm where you practice, use small talk to earn people's trust and establish that essential initial rapport. Similarly use questions to show a genuine interest in the people you're talking to: 'Have you tried any of the nibbles?'; 'How's your Christmas shopping coming along?'

In your group, however, avoid any temptation to monopolise conversation. No matter how interesting your topic, do give everyone else the chance to partake. In fact, allowing others in the group to have a greater speaking part than you can prove a terrific way of getting contacts. By giving someone a greater role, you learn a lot about the other person, you don't have to do the talking (so there's no chance of being thought of as boring) and the person talking feels important and remembers a lively exchange with you.

Also have prepared an answer to the inevitable question: 'And what do you do?' Prepare an answer that succinctly details and shows the benefit of what you do. Be ready to give further information if people want it and speak with enthusiasm about the work that you do.

My card...

Business cards are an important step in the process and they can be exchanged at any time. Either early in the conversation as a way to initiate dialogue, or later on to show an interest in the person to whom you were talking. When a card is offered, resist the temptation to stuff it in your pocket: keep hold of it in your hand. It shows a respect for the person, plus it will come in handy should you forget their name.

There might be other great contacts to meet at the event, so you will have to move on. Don't lie however and use clichés such as 'must go – need to catch my train'. Honesty is always the best policy – especially if they then later find you talking to someone else. Instead, thank the other person, and move on politely.

After the event, you need to follow up, or else your night may have been a waste of time. Instead of sending an email, consider posting a handwritten note – it looks more personal and has greater impact.

And lastly bear in mind, that these events can also prove a great way of making not just business contacts, but friends you can call upon for a while variety of reasons. So good luck, have fun and enjoy the Christmas period.

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