

# How to Overcome Your Networking Anxiety

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In recent years, the term "networking" has climbed the workplace buzzword ranks to join the likes of "synergy" and "monetize." And thanks to a new generation who grew up in a post-Facebook world, we can't get enough of it.

As highly social millennials have entered the workforce, they've brought with them the idea that professional bonding and public sharing is a normal and necessary aspect of doing business. Goodbye to "networking" that consisted of a Rolodex of clients and colleagues and welcome to the world of LinkedIn groups in constant need of updating.

Networking has no doubt done fantastic things for business and entrepreneurs the world over, but what about those of us who fall on the introverted side of the scale? Are we left out at the expense of our careers?

As constant social gatherings and public displays of professionalism become the norm in business, even those of us who would choose Netflix over happy hour any day can still attend, benefit, and (dare I say) enjoy networking events and all they have to offer. We'll just do it on our own terms. Here's how:

## STEP 1: DEVELOP AN OBJECTIVE

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While networking for networking's sake is certainly done, and something that most extroverts don't mind, it's most certainly not a productive use of anyone's time. At some of the best networking events I've attended, the host of the event approached me, asked my name, then asked what I wanted. There was no malice in the direct question, but instead a genuine desire to get down to brass tacks and figure out how we could make each other's professional lives easier.

If you don't have an answer to "What do you want?" you shouldn't be at the event. So what will your objective be? Meeting potential employers? Finding a new client for your business? Learning from successful entrepreneurs in your field? Decide now and start practicing the act of saying it aloud.

## STEP 2: USE THE BUDDY SYSTEM

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One of our favorite introvert tricks: find a yin to your yang. The easiest way to find an in at a networking event is to take a social-savvy, trusted friend or colleague with you. Chances are this person already knows the system. Your Networking Buddy (NB) can not only tell you when

and where her favorite events are but can hold you accountable for attending when you say you will. Once you have arrived, your NB can introduce you to folks she's met before and demonstrate the best ways to start conversations.

If you're in a new city and lack a trusted NB, check out sites like [Meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) for a listing of events in your area.

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## STEP 3: GO

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The simplest step is sometimes the hardest. In order to conquer your fear of networking, you need to actually show up at the event. In economics and game theory, there's something called "a commitment device." In essence, it's something you do *now* to keep yourself honest or committed to an action you already know your *future* self will not be excited about. It's why people buy expensive gym memberships (to avoid slacking off on workouts) or buy expensive healthy groceries on Sundays (to avoid slacking off on your homemade work lunches).

For networking purposes, you'll use two simple commitment devices to get yourself there:

- You're going to prepay for a ticket (assuming the event you're attending has a fee)
- You're going to tell someone you're going

Once the money has been spent and the announcement made, you will be significantly less likely to let yourself hang back simply because you just don't "feel like it."

## STEP 4: START TALKING

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You've been waiting for this part, right?

There are two ways I overcome my own hesitation about talking to strangers at networking events.

First, I scan the room for someone who looks as alone and terrified as I do. Chances are they're along a wall somewhere and fidgeting with their name tag or holding onto their iPhone like it's a safety blanket. Since they're also dreading starting a conversation, they'll welcome you taking the initiative. But here's the added bonus: you can begin a conversation with a premise you're already familiar with—how terribly uncomfortable networking can be. A simple "Hey, did you just get here too?" or "It's my first time here, have you attended these before?" can work wonders in not only calming your own nerves but creating an ally in a sea of strangers.

"Look at your phone" may sound like counterintuitive advice, but we're introverts. There's something to be said for giving yourself some time to acclimate to a thoroughly uncomfortable situation.

If you're not successful in spotting a fellow solo attendee, don't lose strength. Instead,

strategically post-up near the drinks. Whether it's a cocktail happy hour or a breakfast event, everyone heads straight for the beverages and food. If you have a name tag, make sure to write not only your name but also your job title on it. Then? Take a moment to check your phone for new emails. Look up from time to time and smile (seriously, *smile*) at passing strangers. I guarantee you within 5 minutes someone will begin a conversation.

"Look at your phone" may sound like counterintuitive advice, but we're introverts. There's something to be said for giving yourself some time to acclimate to a thoroughly uncomfortable situation. As long as you glance up every minute or two (time yourself if you need to) and smile at those passing, you won't be alone for long.

## STEP 5: LET YOURSELF LEAVE WHEN YOU WANT TO

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You're doing this for yourself and no one else. Believe it or not, networking is not a one-and-done process, so it's important to allow yourself to head home when you feel you're ready. This gives you the opportunity to walk away from your first networking event with a positive impression, meaning you'll feel more confident about attending to the next one.

**What do you do to make your networking experience less scary?**