

Working the Room

At various points during graduate school and the job search process, you will be expected to mingle informally with colleagues and potential employers. This happens at networking socials, conferences, departmental lectures, career fairs, campus visits, and other events. Below are some suggestions that will help you work the room for professional success.

PREPARE & PRACTICE

- Attend as many receptions and networking events as possible so you can practice working a room before it really counts.
- Before attending any networking event, get organized and do your research. Try to find out who will be there and then try to find information about the other guests.
- Prepare and practice a short script so you know how to introduce yourself. It's good to say your name, title/status, organization/program, and perhaps your reason for attending the event – all in ten seconds. Two example scripts are on page five of this handout.
- Consider preparing a 10-second and a 60-second summary of your research.
- Skim the news before each event so you can talk intelligently about current events.

FOOD & DRINK

- Eat before the event. Your main goal is to make contacts, not to satiate yourself.
- Always leave one hand free so you can shake hands and exchange business cards.
- Hold your drink in your left hand so you can shake hands with a warm, dry hand.
- Keep only a small amount of food on your plate at any one time.
- Stick with small foods that are easy to eat with one hand.
- Take small bites so you are readily available to answer questions and make introductions.
- Drink alcohol in moderation.
- Do not chew gum.
- Don't camp out at the refreshment or beverage table.

ENTERING A CONVERSATION

- Make eye contact and approach somebody you know.
- If you don't know anybody, make eye contact with somebody in a group you want to join and approach the group. Consider looking for a group with a physical gap, indicating somebody just exited the group.
- At the appropriate time, shake hands and introduce yourself in 1-2 sentences.
- Start short conversations about current events, hobbies, interests, entertainment, etc.
- You can also discuss something you have in common with other guests – graduated from the same school, members of the same organization, live in the same part of town, etc.
- If it becomes clear a group doesn't want to include you, don't take it personally. Group members may be old friends. Find another group.
- If you have a hard time finding a group to enter, find other individuals in your situation and start your own group or make conversation with somebody at the refreshment table.
- Remember that a positive, confident attitude goes a long way in social situations.

MAINTAINING A CONVERSATION - DO

- Consider asking other individuals in the group to talk about their work - people love to talk about themselves so this strategy effectively builds connections:
 - What do you do?
 - Please describe your current position and organization.
 - Tell me about your most recent project.
 - What is a typical work-day like for you?
 - Can you tell me about your career path and how you got started in your field?
 - What does it take to be successful in your field or organization?
- Once a connection has been developed, consider asking for academic or career advice:
 - Given my interests/strengths in ____, ____, and ____, can you suggest some positions within your field or organization that might be a good fit for me?
 - I'm interested in your field of work and/or organization. What should I do now to prepare myself for my intended career path?
- After you've gotten some advice, focus on future contacts:
 - How can I make additional contacts in your field and/or organization?
 - Can I follow-up with you about this matter in the future?
- If you are part of a group, be sure to welcome and introduce others who approach.
 - To introduce others, consider saying: "I don't think you two have met, have you?"

- Try to use the others' names at some point in the conversation – this shows attention to detail and increases the likelihood of you remembering the names later.
 - If you can't remember somebody's name, say "please tell me your name again."
- Smile and maintain a positive attitude.
- Focus on the conversation rather than scanning the room to plan your escape.

MAINTAINING A CONVERSATION - DON'T

- Do not directly ask for a job or internship.
- Avoid controversial topics such as politics, religion, health problems, etc.
- Don't monopolize the conversation, be aggressive, or try to "one-up" others.
- Even if the room is noisy, try to avoid invading others' personal space.

EXITING A CONVERSATION

- Introduce someone else into the conversation, briefly summarize the conversation for the newcomer, and then excuse yourself.
- If you haven't already exchanged business cards, you can say something like: "It was nice meeting you. Can I have one of your business cards so I can keep in touch?"
- Don't announce your intention to visit the restroom.
- Announcing your intention to get refreshments or talk with a colleague is acceptable.
- End on an optimistic note: good luck, good night, congratulations, etc.
- Make eye contact and join another group.

BUSINESS CARDS

- Have an ample supply with you.
- If you don't have business cards, you can order some from the UW:
<http://www.washington.edu/admin/pubserv/printing/stationery/bcard.html>
- You can also buy business card sheets at an office supply store and create your own.
- Use two easily accessible pockets (or two business card holders) for business cards – one for your cards and one for the cards given to you by others.
- Ask for the other person's card before offering yours.
- When offering a card, turn it so the person can read it immediately upon receiving it.

HANDSHAKES

- Go for medium pressure, rather than wimpy or bone-crushing.
- Consider hiding a napkin or handkerchief in your pocket so you can quickly dry your hand before extending your hand for a handshake.

ATTIRE & NAMETAGS

- Go for business casual (slacks or skirt with blouse, sweater, or collared shirt). Ties and sport coats are appropriate too.
- If you're not sure what to wear, ask a colleague, email the event organizer, or check the event website for attire instructions and photos from previous events.
- If you're still not sure, err on the side of conservative and dressy.
- Try not to bring your backpack, lunch sack, or other unnecessary baggage.
- Professional-looking purses and briefcases are appropriate. Keep in mind, however, that you want to keep your hands free so you can shake hands and exchange business cards.
- Wear your nametag on your right side so it is easy to read when shaking hands.
- Write legibly on your nametag.

MISCELLANEOUS

- Turn off your cell phone, Blackberry, Palm Pilot, beeper, watch alarm, etc.
- When the opportunity presents itself, hold the door for the person coming behind you.
- If you make a mistake, don't get rattled. Laugh it off. Learn from the situation.

WHAT TO BRING

- Ample supply of business cards and 1-2 business card holders
- Breath mints
- One or two nice writing pens
- Napkin or handkerchief
- Knowledge of the event you're attending and, if possible, knowledge of other guests
- Knowledge of current events
- Positive attitude

AFTER THE EVENT

- If appropriate, send a thank-you note to the host.
- Make some notes on the back of the business cards you collected.
- Follow-through with any promises you made at the event.

WRITE YOUR PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

Before any networking event, you should prepare and practice a personal introduction so you can comfortably and professionally introduce yourself to others. The personal introduction is also known as the personal script, spiel, infomercial, and elevator speech. Your introduction will vary based on the type of event you're attending, the level of familiarity you have with others at the event, and your career goals. After reading the examples, draft a version of your introduction.

Example: My name is Mary Martin. I am currently a master's student in the digital media program at the University of Washington. I'll be completing my degree in June and am exploring career paths that will allow me to use my strengths in communication, creativity, and web development.

Example: My name is Bob Butler. I will earn my doctorate in physics in 2007. I plan to work in industry, rather than academia, and am interested to find out what I should be doing now to prepare myself for the transition to industry next year. My specific area of interest is _____.

You also need to be prepared to talk about your research at different levels of detail. You should prepare three descriptions of your research interests: 10-second description, 60-second description, and 5-minute description. Write a draft of your 10-second description.

REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- Lincoln Johnson / Director, Student Activities & Union Facilities / University of Washington
- Laura Mondino / Sr Career Advisor, Natural Sciences Career Services / University of Texas, Austin
- Lisel Moynihan / Advisor, Ford Career Center / University of Texas, Austin
- Immen, W. (2005). Practice makes perfect at social events. Previously available at <http://globeandmail.workopolis.com>
- Ryan, R. (2005). *Soaring on your strengths*. Toronto: Penguin.
- Thompson, K., & Wein, T. I. (2005). *Speak up, shake hands, and smile*. The Chronicle of Higher Education. <http://chronicle.com/jobs/2005/09/2005093001c.htm>
- Zupke, R. (2007). *The worst way to shake hands*. <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/LIVING/worklife/11/05/cb.hand.shake/index.html>