

## The Art of Working the Room

**T**HESE DAYS, "NETWORKING" seems to be the buzz word on everyone's lips. If you mention to someone that you have your own practice, they usually ask what networking group (or groups) you are in. There are community groups (such as the Chamber of Commerce), there are profession based groups (such as attorneys only or accountants only groups), and there are groups that mix business people from many professions. Some groups meet weekly while some meet monthly and some have requirements or guidelines about referrals while others merely seek to facilitate the conversation.

Whichever group you choose, a fundamental requirement exists for each: you have to be able to carry on a conversation. For the wallflowers (of any profession) in the room, this is a particularly daunting task. As attorneys, we often find ourselves wandering into rooms (courtrooms) filled with people we do not know and many of us are able to strike up conversation and navigate without too much stress. But what about those who are uncomfortable in a crowd? How do you handle the stress (and fear) that comes from not knowing a soul in a crowded room?

I was reminded of this recently at a party when I spied someone standing in the middle of the room, not talking to anyone and just watching things go on around them. The guests at the party were all inter-related, many family members or close friends who see each other often throughout the year. This

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particular guest also interacts with some of those friends and family members on a fairly regular basis. And yet she placed herself on the fringe, sometimes talking to those who engaged her, but not engaging anyone on her own and not moving from that spot where she initially placed herself.

Now put this same guest in a business setting, in a room where she does not know anyone and would be required to strike up conversation, or even sell her company's product or services. Would she be able to handle it? Or would she simply melt back into the wallpaper?

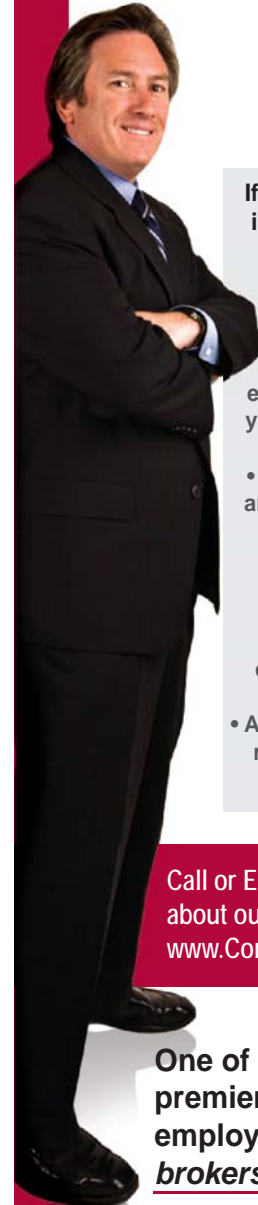
We often see this with our children. My 3-year-old sometimes has difficulty entering a crowded room and engaging others, even those that she knows well, in conversation. She clings to my legs or asks me to hold her while we make the rounds. Once she has a better feel for the room, she eases up and starts to interact.

I myself was shy in high school and college, often gravitating to those I knew well and not opening up to others. Crowded rooms were the worst for me, as it often felt like everyone there knew each other and everyone else knew that I was the outsider.

Of course some people appear to be born with that innate ability to walk into a room and greet everyone, making a connection with at least ten different people within minutes. I'm not one of those people. However, over the past ten years, I have found myself in many sink-or-swim situations, where I could either plaster

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myself to the wall and try to blend in or I could jump in with both feet and work the room.

As an SCVBA board member, I found that I needed to be able to introduce myself to members at meetings, to talk to people I might not know, and greet those I already knew. There are a few things I have learned that have helped me and may help others who fear the crowded room.

First, you are not the only one. There are likely at least two or three other individuals in the room who do not know a soul. Find them and you will have an ally.

Second, never underestimate your own popularity. You may not know anyone, but someone there may know you or have heard of you and want to meet you.


Third, it is very unlikely that you will not know anyone. Even if you do not personally know anyone, the odds are good that you will find someone with whom you have a friend in common. This often happens to me at school or temple events. Eventually, I discover that the person I am speaking with has a relative, friend, or child's teacher that I know. Once you find that common ground, conversation may come easier.

Fourth, smile. This may seem simple and even silly but sometimes you have to remind yourself to smile. When you come into a room with personal things on your mind and add

that to the stress of entering the room alone, you may project an unfriendly image. Someone who might have wanted to approach you could decide not to if you look upset or standoffish.

Fifth, put the phone away. Yes, this also seems simple and possibly a no-brainer but in today's tech age, we often turn to our smart phones and other devices for comfort and companionship when we are uncomfortable. (Take a quick look around the next crowded room you find yourself in and note how many people are standing or sitting by themselves, looking down at their phones.) Resist the temptation to hide behind your phone. Put it away and refer back to my fourth tip. Put on a smile and go shake a hand.

I have found that once I make a connection with one person in the room, other connections will follow and flow from that. If the person I am speaking with knows someone else, they will generally introduce me and further connections are made. These connections form the backbone of your network and are part and parcel of your networking attempts. Without these connections, business may be harder to generate in the long run.

One final tip: you never know where business will come from. Even in social settings, you may meet someone who will later want to refer business to you. So continue to smile and good luck working the room. 

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