

# Connection Pros

In last month's column, I identified the three biggest fears that most people experience when it comes to networking. I spent a lot of time discussing how to overcome any discomforts you might have about approaching new people. This month, I'm going to talk about the remaining two fears: appearing too pushy and not knowing what to say when you meet new people.

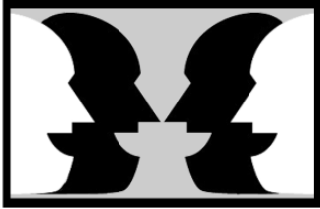
I frequently hear, "I know I need to stay in touch, but how do I do that without becoming a pest?" I believe a sound network is based on long-term relationships. You need to develop a follow-up strategy to communicate with your contacts on a regular basis and keep them informed. If you can provide your network with information that can be beneficial to them, you never have to worry about being too pushy. Consider these ideas and think about what you could do to keep in touch with your contacts:

- Drop a congratulatory note to someone whose name you hear or read in the media. We all like to be recognized.
- Invite your network to attend a trade show or other event you are involved in. Attendance is not the crucial issue. Your invitation demonstrates your keen desire to keep them informed.
- Send a copy of an article, or information on a pertinent web site, if you think it might be of interest.
- Share information with your network about upcoming conferences or conventions.
- Invite your network to attend an event sponsored by your company or organization.
- Above all, be alert to opportunities that might benefit your network and recommend them to others for consideration.

These ideas require a little imagination, time, and effort, but these steps help establish and maintain a level of trust. Consistently share valuable or useful information with your contacts and they will not only seek you out for assistance, but be receptive if you call them for help. I want to thank Reg Perie from *CanadaOne* Magazine for some of the information in this article.

Now that you know how to follow up with people without feeling pushy, let's look at how you can feel comfortable starting conversations with people you've just met.

If you are one of the millions of people who get very nervous and uncomfortable about the idea of chatting with people you don't know, don't feel bad. Even veteran networkers (including me) find this challenging.



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Here is what normally happens. Sometimes, after you introduce yourself and say what you do and listen to what the other person does, the conversation stalls. This is where the discomfort begins. By being prepared with a few good opening lines, you will find that these little conversations will become fun and enjoyable. What? You don't have any good opening lines? Allow me to share a few of mine.

- “What do you like to do when you're not working?” This simple question is the best way to create conversation. You give people permission to start talking about non-business topics, and for this, they will be grateful. Listen closely to the answer, because the first thing they mention is usually where their greatest passion lies, whether it's golf, travel or family. Whatever it is, it's the thing they love talking about most. Always remember that these conversations create the best connections.
- “How did you get into your current business?” People love sharing the details of how they started their own business, or how they were selected for their current position. However, just know that once people get started, it's tough to get them to stop.
- “Hi, I'm Dave, and I have never been to this function before. Have you?” Honesty like this always works and can produce great results. People who have attended that specific event before will more than likely go out of their way to make sure you are comfortable and enjoying yourself. On the other hand, if they're new, you can support each other in learning about the group. No one likes to be alone at a new event.
- “Have you ever been to (this venue) before?” Opening lines like this address your shared reality. What is shared reality? The space you are sharing, the paintings on the walls, the view from the window, or the food at the buffet. Other opening lines include, “Did you try the Swedish meatballs?” or “What a beautiful view from here.” Always check out the space so you can be prepared with a great shared-reality comment.

There are dozens of things you can say to initiate conversation. Read the newspaper or watch the news before you attend an event, and you will always be able to create conversations with just about anyone. See you next month!