How To Work A Room™

The art of building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships.

It’s 6:50 a.m. at an early-riser business-and-technology conference at the Museum of Science in Boston. A model of Skylab hangs from the high ceiling of the upper concourse, giving the room a dreamy feeling. The attendees, a mix of about 750 businesspeople, entrepreneurs, techies and venture capitalists, have come to scout clients, investors, or jobs.

That’s certainly what drew Diane Darling. Author of The Networking Survival Guide, Darling is a corporate consultant, business school lecturer, and sought after as an expert in networking. As the conference begins, she straightens her name tag, pops a mint and strides the crowd.

A week before, Darling researches the event on the Web to get a sense of the audience. “That way I could do a little research on people I want to meet and use that information to break the ice with them,” she explains. “Are these people entrepreneurs? CEOs? VCs? I try to know as much as I can about the crowd before going.”

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Approach VIPs first

Darling darts over to one of the morning’s guest speakers, a Harvard Business School professor, a good 15 minutes before his presentation starts. “Keynote speakers are easy to talk to and can be great contacts, but after they give their speeches they’re always swamped.”

Get an introduction

After traversing the room twice, she spots the conference moderator, a player in the Boston media world. He’s alone drinking coffee, but sure she knows a mutual acquaintance to give her an introduction. Rather than approaching him solo she enlists a friend as an introduction. “’An intro is like an implicit endorsement, and the next time we meet, there will be that association and that context.’”

Give and take

The moderator mentions that he’s looking to get in touch with a professor at MIT who Darling happens to know. She offers to sail the professor as a way of introduction. “Always try to be a connector, the person who brings people together,” she says. “This not only makes Darling look well-connected, it may also make the moderator want to return her favor.”

It’s a wrap

After three hours, Darling has talked to about two dozen new contacts. She leaves the conference with plans to call at least two of them. She leaves the conference with plans to call at least two of them.

Source: Jeff Ousborne. Originally appeared in MBA Jungle Magazine | ©2002 xplane.com