



SEASON'S GREETINGS



Christmas is a time for parties, and in business that means one thing – networking. But how can you make the most of these opportunities? Read on for our expert advice.

THE ADAGE "IT'S NOT WHAT YOU KNOW, BUT WHO YOU KNOW" IS only half right. The well-connected fool is still a fool, but research suggests that networking is what separates successful leaders from the rest of the bunch.

The Christmas and New Year period is an ideal time for parties – and networking – yet many business people avoid the opportunities presented to them. Some think they don't have time for parties. Others dismiss them as manipulative – we all know colleagues who try just a little too hard. However, savvy senior executives don't dread these social events, they embrace them wholeheartedly, taking advantage of all the networking opportunities that the season offers, and putting themselves in line for the best unadvertised positions and sales leads.

A recent study by Insead professor Herminia Ibarra identifies three types of networks: operational (the people you need to accomplish your day-to-day tasks); personal (kindred spirits outside your organisation who can help you with personal advancement); and strategic (the players outside your control who will enable you to reach key career and organisational objectives). Ibarra reckons that while senior executives are good at maintaining the first two kinds, they neglect strategic networking, missing a golden chance to burnish their own performance – and their company's.

Even in this age of Facebook and LinkedIn, face-to-face networking still reigns. And times of economic slowdown simply make the need for networking more crucial. In particular, international networking can be a huge help when faced with domestic troubles, by helping you generate new overseas contacts with potential customers, suppliers, partners – and maybe even employers. "Having a good network in place is the best remedy when economic situations change: as a safety net or as an avalanche of opportunities," says Jan Vermeiren, managing director of Belgian consulting firm Step by Step and author of networking book *Let's Connect*.

Perhaps the most famous book on networking, though, is Dale Carnegie's 1936 classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. According to Peter Handal, chairman of Dale Carnegie & Associates, most senior executives now know the basics of networking – dressing smartly, giving a firm handshake, and so on, but the next level of networking is all about subtlety. "More than anything, it means allowing yourself to shine without appearing contrived or overwrought," says Handal, who credits one of his biggest job successes to networking at a "pleasant lunch in New York".

HOW'S IT DONE? MAKE THE PARTY SEASON WORK FOR YOU BY FOLLOWING THE ADVICE OF OUR NETWORKING EXPERTS:

1. **Adopt the right attitude.** "My definition of this is sharing information without expecting anything immediately in return," says Vermeiren. "A right attitude also means genuinely caring about helping others, maintains Dan Trampedach, co-founder of DABGO, a network for Danes working abroad. "When you care about helping others, you learn enough about their business to see how you can help. You start asking questions. You learn about their competitors, customers and employees. A genuine networker wants to help others reach their goals," says Trampedach, who recommends that networking executives should give away some of their time and knowledge by attending seminars and conferences, mentoring junior executives (and meeting a new crowd) and hosting their own events and get-togethers.

2. **Be selective.** If you don't want to spread yourself too thinly, decide which events are worth your time, based on their networking potential and the amount of fun you think you'll have. Vermeiren also suggests you keep under review events that you attend regularly. "Ask yourself, is it still useful, interesting and fun to go to these events and be a member? It's okay to cancel some memberships and exchange them for new ones."

3. **Do your homework.** Find out who else is expected to be attending the event, then decide which individuals you want to meet. If necessary, check them out on Google, Facebook or LinkedIn so you can have an intelligent discussion with them. Apparently Bill Clinton keeps an information card for everyone he has met since he was at university.

4. **Take a colleague.** It's much easier to "work the room" with another person by your side. Choose a colleague with whom you're reasonably compatible and who brings out the best in you and vice versa.

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5. **Build rapport.** People like people who are similar to them, says Lenka Majstrikov, a UK-based practitioner in neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). "The best known methods of building rapport include the sharing of common experiences and hobbies, but less known methods include the matching and mirroring of physiology through gestures, posture, breathing, language and tonality," she explains. "NLP teaches you how to build rapport with other people eloquently, creating a state of trust in a very short time."

6. **Relax.** Networking should be an enjoyable process, says Trampedach. "Loosen up and focus on the people you're talking to rather than on the 'next big deal'. For many people, networking is about instant gratification – about what they can gain from the conversation – but with a deferred gratification approach you will quickly prosper from your networking without it having felt uncomfortable." You shouldn't be overeager, agrees Handal. "Avoid appearing opportunistic at all costs. It is prudent to allow yourself access to the right place at the right time, but it is an entirely different thing to step over others while doing so. Making enemies en route to the top is never advisable."

7. **Listen up.** It's often said that introverts make better networkers because they prefer to listen than talk. And don't cut people off when someone "more important" comes into view.

8. **Quality not quantity.** Some networkers operate a "one-metre rule", where they make a point of chatting to anyone who comes within a metre radius of them at an event. But it's better to leave an event having had one meaningful conversation with a carefully chosen contact than to return to the office with 30 fruitless business cards.

9. **Keep moving.** How do you avoid those "sticky" individuals who take up your valuable time and are difficult to shake off? Senior executives must schedule their time carefully, cautions Handal. "A polite demeanour goes a long way in this case, for if you believe a contact is wasting your valuable time, you can easily slip away with a solid handshake, smile and a few clear and concrete words about a prior engagement," he suggests. "As long as you do not imply that you are too important, the person will understand and appreciate your candour."

10. **Follow-up.** After the event, be sure to email the new contacts you have made, telling them it was good to meet them, and maybe suggest another meeting. "Very few people follow up when meeting a new person and receiving a business card or contact details," says Trampedach. "Make sure to follow up within 24 business hours – it will make you stand out from the crowd and increase your credibility with your new contact. A quick follow-up displays your level of commitment to relationships." □