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# How To Start And End A Conversation And Avoid Awkward Silences At Networking Events

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*Written By: Cathy Sorbara, Ph.D.*

"I really liked the keynote speaker. His conclusions were well thought-out," I said once.

*"Actually, I found his conclusions a bit off and scattered,"* the other person replied.

"Oh. Me too," I responded.

**(Abort mission.)**

(Find a place to hide.)

(This person now thinks I'm a moron.)

I looked frantically for exit signs, a fire alarm to pull — any sitcom diversion that would allow me to escape how awkward this all felt for me.

Instead I said...

"Well, I will leave you to it, then."

(What does that even mean?)

**I felt betrayed by what came out of my mouth because it never represented how smart and valuable I was.**

I would leave, frustrated and angry with myself.

This is why I used to dread networking events.

The dread of walking into a room full of [people I have never met](#) before.

Not just walking in, but walking in with a purpose — to connect.

## **There was always a battle in my head.**

The battle between knowing I had to network if I wanted to get an industry job, and being so uncomfortable that I wanted to leave the networking event and go home and watch TV.

My heart would race.

I felt small and unsure.

I would search for the friendliest face in the room — the least threatening person I could find — and then make feeble attempts at conversation.

**The words that came out were never polished like they were in my head before the event.**

And I always thought of better things to say after the event.

It was all so painful for me, internally.

My inner critic analyzed every situation as it happened.

The thing is, I am personable.

**But starting and ending networking conversations always made me feel self-conscious.**

I assumed I was interrupting their otherwise enjoyable evening and, even worse, I was lingering too long when they had more important people to speak with.

Segueing from one conversation to another at a networking event is a skill.

As soon as I learned this skill, I started building rapport with industry professionals.

Eventually, this led to setting up [informational interviews](#), getting referrals, and transitioning into the [alternative career I wanted](#).

## Why PhDs Must Network In Person To Be Successful

The truth is, in business, face-to-face networking at conferences or in-person meetings dictate whether a sale is made, a merger is acquired, or a consumer is won over.

A [2014 study by Ogilvy Cannes](#) showed that 74% of consumers identify word-of-mouth as a key influencer in their purchasing decision, even more so than social media or printed advertising.

This translates directly to the job market.

**It's no secret that face-to-face networking is a critical component of any job search strategy.**

[A study cited by Forbes](#) showed that face-to-face networking is the MOST effective strategy, with over 40% of jobs successfully landed as a result of it.

This 40% is 15% higher than the boost provided by online job boards and 30% higher than any other job search strategy available.

Face-to-face [networking provides recognition](#).

It makes you memorable.

**You can make a more memorable impression**

**in person than words on a resume or in an email ever could.**

A great conversation, combined with positive body language, adds context and can make the difference in your job search.



## **How To Enter And Exit A Networking Conversation Without Awkwardness**

No one likes being the stranger in the room.

It's uncomfortable and awkward.

**But everyone's been a stranger.**

Everyone is human.

Remember this the next time you walk into a networking event.

No one is better than you and no one is worse off.

Everyone is just looking to have a few comfortable conversations.

# Here's the key: great conversations happen by design, not luck.

First, you need to gain the confidence and rhythm of smoothly striking up conversation.

Second, you need to learn how to leave a conversation without being rude.

It's rude to be abrupt and cut off the end of a conversation, but it's also rude to monopolize someone's time and be clingy.

Here are 8 strategies for how to start and end a conversation at your next networking event and avoid any of those dreaded awkward silences...

## 1. Look approachable and have a firm handshake.

As unfair as it seems, your physical appearance and body language are closely tied to snap impressions about your personality and intelligence.

Psychologist Edward Thorndike first identified this in 1920 as the [\*halo effect\*](#), which is the tendency for an impression in one area to influence our opinion in another area.

In other words, if your handshake is limp, you will be perceived as weak-minded.

**There is nothing worse than a limp and squishy handshake for a first impression.**

The same is true for someone who dresses unprofessionally.

If you show up to a professional networking event in your yoga outfit, you will be perceived as unintelligent and incompetent (and it makes it look

like you can't be bothered to make an effort).

Likewise, if you do not make eye contact, you will be perceived as untrustworthy.

## **Make people want to pay attention to you.**

Walk into a room with good posture and your eyes up.

Make eye contact and be mindful of your facial expressions.

In other words, don't scowl at the lousy coffee they're serving or stare at your phone in the corner.

Appear friendly and welcoming and use positive body language.

## **Exude confidence.**

If you don't feel confident, fake it until you do.

You can exude confidence without actually being confident.

## **2. Begin every conversation with a question.**

The key to striking up a good conversation is to [build rapport with the other person.](#)

You have no idea whether they have a sense of humor or if they follow the same politics as you, so the safest bet is to start with an easy question.

Keep it neutral and avoid contentious topics entirely.

**Ask their opinion on the keynote address, the current weather, or the catering.**

It is benign, but will generate conversation and get the ball rolling.

That's the purpose of small talk, no matter how much you loathe it.

Alternatively, you can ask for help.

Ask if they know a good restaurant in town, or local artisan coffee shop.

People like giving advice or talking about their favorites and this can provide unique insights into their personality that can help build rapport.

**Do NOT ask, "Can you help me get a job?"**

Keep it classy.

Ask for simple advice, not for someone to be your personal hiring manager.

### **3. Show interest and give legitimate compliments.**

Before you go to a networking event, always do your homework on who will be there.

Find one or two people who will be attending that you would like to meet.

This takes some of the guesswork out of small talk as you can prepare questions for these people in your mind in advance.

When you see them, tell them you have been hoping to meet them and why.

Knowing that you have gone out of your way to introduce yourself and that you have a keen interest

in them will [grab their attention and start the conversation](#) effortlessly.

**If the crowd is completely unfamiliar, try to use nametags as a clue for conversation starters.**

For example, look for people who have attended the same universities or are located in cities you have visited or wish to visit.

These are all great conversation starting points.

Once the ball is rolling, be an active listener.

Ask questions based on their responses and show interest in their work and their life.

Only talk about yourself if they initiate it by asking you a specific question.

Answer succinctly and then turn the tables back to them by asking a new question.

## **4. Enter a networking circle with simple introductions.**

Perhaps the most nerve-wracking part of networking is walking up to a group of people already talking and introducing yourself.

Here is where developing an elevator pitch is pivotal.

When you walk up to the group, the focus will be on you.

You must be engaging and appeal to each listener.

Don't just stand there and wait for someone else to introduce you or ask about you.

**This will lead to you awkwardly standing in the circle silently while everyone continues their conversation.**

Instead, wait for a brief pause and say hello to the person directly across from you.

Introduce yourself quickly, using your elevator pitch, and shake hands.

Then turn to your right and left to do the same.

You won't need to repeat your elevator pitch, but you will need to shake each person's hand, say hello, and exchange names.

After this happens, ask a question to someone else in the group.

**If possible, ask a question relevant to their previous conversation.**

[Do NOT start rambling about your thesis](#) work, your degrees, or the schools you attended.

This is not the time or place.

Instead, craft it from the perspective of the other people in the group.

How can you help them?

How can you make their job easier or appeal to their personal interests?

Think about the value you can bring to others and why you are unique.

## 5. Offer an introduction or ask to be introduced to someone else.

Third-party introductions work great if you are networking at a crowded event.

If you feel the one-on-one conversation has run its course, you can offer to introduce the other person to someone else you have already connected with at the event, or vice versa.

**When you offer the introduction, do your best to add value at the same time.**

For example, you could introduce someone by saying...

“Hi Jane, great to see you again. You should meet my colleague, Peter. He lived in Munich for two years and can offer you some travel advice for your upcoming vacation.

This way, you are not simply offloading them onto someone else and moving on, but actually adding value to both parties by helping connect them via a common interest.

**Conversely, you can ask to be introduced to someone else.**

Simply tell the other person you’ve really enjoyed the conversation and were wondering if they knew anyone else at the event that might be worth meeting.

## 6. Use the friend life-line to exit a conversation.

Once a conversation has run its course, it's time to move on.

This usually occurs after 5-10 minutes of talking to someone new.

**At this time, both parties will usually want to end the conversation, but neither will quite know how to end it.**

The best and most commonly used strategy to end a networking conversation is the buddy system.

If you are attending a networking event with a friend, ask the friend to come whisk you away after 5-10 minutes or when you look over at him or her.

**This is a surefire way to avoid an embarrassing, drawn out goodbye.**

If you are attending a networking event alone, simply tell the other person that you enjoyed talking with them and that you have to go say hello to someone else.

You can also tell them that you will "circle back" to talk with them some more if you get the chance.

This last bit will help you in the chance that you bump into them again at the event.

Now, you don't have to awkwardly pretend like you don't see them because you already said goodbye.

Instead, you can say a few words about what you were talking about before and exit again in peace.

**7. Use closing statements to indicate the end of a**

## conversation.

The conversation has come to its natural conclusion and there is no obvious exit plan.

You can simply say “I don’t want to monopolize your time and it’s been great chatting, but I should be on my way.”

**Chances are, if you think the conversation has concluded, so do they.**

Most often, the other person will be grateful that you spared them the awkwardness of lingering chatter.

Another good closing statement is, “It’s been great talking with you, Sam. I’m glad I ran into you.”

This is a natural closing statement that prompts an end to a conversation almost immediately.

It is also helpful to close with a compliment and use the contact’s name as much as possible to establish rapport.

“That is very impressive work, Susan. Thank you for sharing. I have a few more people I need to say hello to, but will circle back if possible.”

**The verbal tone of these final lines will set the precedent that you are ready to leave.**

Using transition words such as ‘well’ before the final line will also establish that you are ready to end the conversation.

“Well, I am glad we had the chance to meet, Paul.”

Translation: thank you and goodbye for now.

## 8. Exit the conversation by suggesting a future meeting.

If time is running out but you would like to continue building a relationship with your new connection, you can suggest a future meeting.

**“I’d like to talk more with you about this. Can I get your contact details so we can talk over coffee sometime outside of this busy event?”**

This ensures your contact won’t be offended as you have already established a reason to connect later.

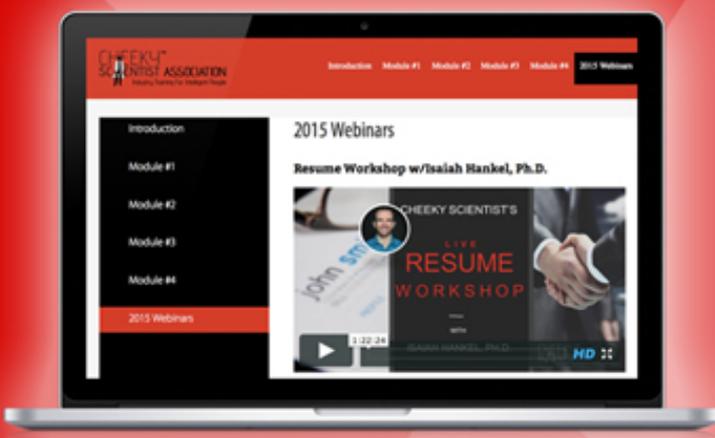
Be sure to ask for their business card so you can follow up later.

This says that you are interested in communicating with them further but that the conversation at present has come to a close.

**Mastering the skill of networking is no easy task. Most PhDs find networking awkward and try to avoid it.** Yet, learning how to carry yourself with confidence and start conversations with people at networking events can yield significant benefits to your job search strategy. Equally important is the skill of gracefully and professionally exiting a conversation when it’s appropriate and without appearing rude or lacking confidence. No matter how the conversation goes, remember to always follow up and build on (and improve upon) the original conversation. If you do not do this, the hard work you have put into networking will have gone to waste.

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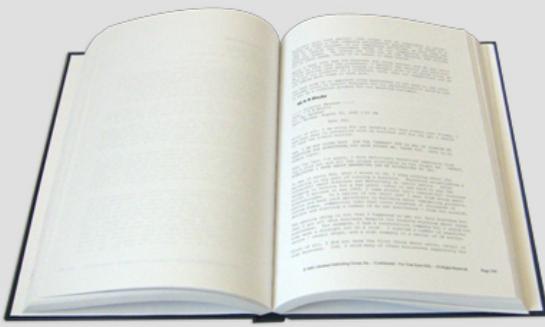
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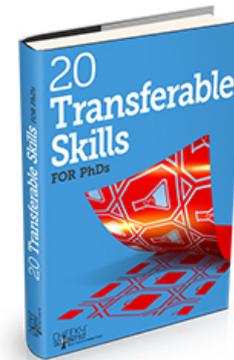


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