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## For a Memorable Networking Encounter, Ask Questions



by **Jonna L. Martin**  
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The man in the khakis and golf shirt shocked me into speechlessness. It wasn't his casual attire. At this networking function, most attendees were dressed casually. What amazed me was his answer to my question: "So, tell me, what do you do?" His response: "I really don't want to talk about myself, I want to know more about you." His answer resonated in a powerful way.

Networking specialists encourage us to hone our skills by mastering self-introductions and "elevator speeches." There are Web sites containing fill-in-the-blank pitches that we can memorize, and some experts recommend that we craft a 30-second "commercial" about ourselves. My friend in the golf shirt reminded me that an authentic interest in others is the best way to start any conversation or business relationship. Had he launched into a perfectly crafted commercial about himself, he would not have been as memorable. He convinced me that the best way to engage others is to ask sincere questions with a genuine interest in the answers.

If you don't know what questions to ask, start with something open-ended like, "How did you get into the marmalade production business?" Of course, it's best to use this type of question after reading their specific industry affiliation on a nametag or business card. One benefit of this method is that it eliminates small talk. We are simply asking questions and listening to the answers so that we can find out about the person, ask another question, and perhaps find some common ground.

Even if you ask a lot of questions, there comes a point during each encounter where we need to say something about who we are and what we do. My advice is to keep it to a sound bite, and provide just enough information to pique someone's interest. The message should be communicated with passion and excitement. Hopefully, we are so enthusiastic about what we do, that we are compelled to share this information.

The average networking encounter is usually three to five minutes. Once you have had a pleasant exchange, it is time to exit gracefully. The key to accomplishing this is to say something gracious, such as "It has been a pleasure speaking with you," then ask for your new acquaintance's business card before offering yours and shake hands. There is no need to explain why you are moving on or where you are headed next. The exchange of cards allows you to follow up with an e-mail or short note.

According to the United States Bureau of Labor, 70 percent of all jobs are found through networking. In a study conducted by BNI International, the largest business networking organization in the world, half of 3,152 survey respondents indicated that they receive more than 70 percent of their business by networking. So, whether you are looking for a new job or more business opportunities, networking should be a part of your strategy. Becoming an effective networker is easy if you remember that the most memorable person is the one who says, "Tell me more about yourself."



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