

Networking – 7 questions that make you more likable

By Lily Herman

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To many, networking events sound as appealing as getting teeth pulled, but that doesn't mean they have to be so dreadful. Instead, great networking is all about having questions ready that start actual conversations, not mundane small talk.

After asking dozens of professionals their go-to networking questions, I found two important patterns.

First, the best questions are open-ended and can't be answered with a simple yes or no; think essay questions instead of multiple choice.

Second, the key to good networking may surprise you: don't talk just about work. If you've ever worked in London, or in Europe, you'll be familiar with the belief that people [represent more than their job titles and salaries](#). Get to know the person in front of you.

I asked some of the most successful people I know how they sharpened their networking skills. Here were the top seven responses that came up over and over again.

1) "What are your hobbies?"

"I've found out that colleagues' non-work projects include woodworking, gardening, marathon training, volunteer firefighting, baking pastries and vocal lessons," explains Brittany Meyers, a writer and editor. "I like the enthusiasm I see in people for something besides their work."

Plus, Brittany says that knowing people's hobbies makes it easier to remember everyone since getting faces and name tags straight is a challenge.

2) "What are you reading these days?"

"Asking what's on someone's nightstand or e-reader tells you more about the person you're meeting than a LinkedIn profile or business card ever could," notes Felicia Sullivan, marketing consultant and founder of [Phoebe & Kate](#).

This one not only leads to more meaningful conversations, but it also makes it easier to follow up with people afterwards. "We met at that networking event" isn't as memorable as "so glad we got to talk about our mutual love of House of Cards."

3) "Any good travel plans coming up?"

"I was born and raised in Texas, lived for almost 15 years in California, lived in Boston [and] Mexico and traveled to Australia and Europe before landing back in Texas," says Kat Clemons, director of community development at nonprofit Hope Village. "I love finding out that people have awesome traveling stories or are from somewhere totally different."

You can also ask people where they grew up, but note that the question can be misinterpreted as a loaded one for minorities or immigrants since it can have an implication of "you're not from around here." If they volunteer it, however, feel free to dive into a conversation about it.

Everyone has an origin story, or they're planning a trip soon, so there's bound to be an interesting conversation without having to drop the "so, what do you do?" question right off the bat.

4) "I love that scarf! Where did you get it?"

"I find that genuinely complimenting someone on a statement piece that they are wearing immediately breaks the ice, as it makes the other person feel good and they are more open during the conversation," explains Chanele McFarlane, founder and editor-in-chief of [Do Well Dress Well](#).

Additionally, McFarlane notes that wearing something interesting (like an bold necklace or bright blazer) to a networking event is a great way to use appearance as a conversation-starter.

5. “Do you have a ‘wow’ project you’re involved with?”

If you want to elevate the typical “what do you do?” question, add a little nuance by letting people brag.

“It assumes [people] do have a significant project in the works and allows them to talk about whatever is at the top of their mind,” explains David Burrows, a tech entrepreneur. Who doesn’t like to show off the things they’re most proud of?

6) “What are you passionate about?”

“People are used to be asked what they do and where they work, so I’ve seen them be pleasantly startled by this question,” says Tammy Tibbetts, founder and CEO of nonprofit She’s The First. “It’s a way of showing you care about them more than who they work for.”

Asking this doesn’t have to sound like a stiff job interview question, either; working it into the conversation can be as easy as, “So if you weren’t doing [job], what would you do instead?”

7) “Have you been to [city] or [event space] before? What’s it like?”

Bonding over your physical surroundings or the general event environment makes for a much more natural conversation starter than asking what someone does. “I’ve learned a lot about people because of this approach,” says Melissa Jones, recruitment and HR specialist at the United Technologies Research Center. “It breaks up the monotony of where you work, which you’ll eventually get around to anyway.”

5 ways to get to know someone without using cookie-cutter questions

*By Jane Burnett
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When it comes to networking events, there’s a whole world of topics that you could potentially ask someone about. So, why not try asking about something that will let you in on who they really are?

Here are a few lighthearted icebreakers that you can use when you want to get to know someone.

Ask them about their personality

An Indeed Career Guide [post](#) features the question, “Which season fits your personality best — spring, summer, fall, or winter — and why?”

There are so many ways to answer, but whatever response you get is sure to make you feel like you learned something new and entertaining. Maybe some of their personality will be extra obvious during the rest of your conversation!

Ask them about their past

[David Burkus](#), an author and Associate Professor of Leadership and Innovation at Oral Roberts University, features questions that you can pose to people — excluding “What do you do?” [in the Harvard Business Review](#).

One of them is, “Where did you grow up?”

“This question dives into others’ backgrounds (but in a much less assertive and loaded way than ‘Where are you from?’),” Burkus writes, “and allows them to answer with simple details from childhood or to engage in their story of how they got to where they are right now and what they’re doing.”

Ask them about their travel aspirations

[Aja Frost](#), a staff writer for [HubSpot](#), features this question [in *The Muse*](#): “If you could fly anywhere for free, where would you go?”

You might be surprised at what you hear. Everyone has their own idea of paradise, so it could be interesting to find out where they would go if the question of money wasn’t even on the table.

Ask them about their philosophy on life

Ok, so there’s a much more casual way to ask about something like this. Susan M. Heathfield, an HR expert, management and organization development consultant, includes [icebreaker questions](#) for meetings in *The Balance*.

One of Heathfield’s recommendations: “If you were to create a slogan for your life, what would the slogan be? (Examples: ‘Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow, we all die.’ ‘Bite off more than you can chew.’ ‘There are far better things ahead than any we leave behind.’).”

This is definitely a playful approach to learning about someone’s outlook on life, but sometimes, that’s what you need to feel comfortable around someone new.

Ask them about their taste in food

[Museum Hack](#), which operates tours and team building exercises at museums, features this icebreaker question (among a list of 100) [on the website](#): “What is your favorite meal to cook and why?”

Everyone has a favorite food. And, while whether or not they know how to cook it is another story, they’re sure to give you an answer that makes it clear that there’s more to life than just work.

After all, work [shouldn’t be your “everything.”](#)