

How to create new contacts and gain permission to stay in touch.

What to do if you know no-one.

Introducing yourself and others with confidence.

Starting, maintaining and finishing lively and interesting conversations.

How to turn a social chat into a business conversation.

Circulating with elegance and effect.

Advice for the inexperienced host.

Business gatherings like cocktail parties, receptions, conferences, association meetings, seminars and the like all have a social element to them, just as a party or barbecue at your neighbour's house would too.

These are the arenas where the connector's skills of listening, questioning, being interested and building rapport come to the fore. These functions are a meeting place where, if you know how to do it, you'll make new contacts that may lead to new friendships or new business. You'll also have interesting conversations and widen the circle of people you know.

The true connectors know how to "work a room". If you could be a fly on the wall at a cocktail party, for example, you'd see them circulating easily and with grace around the room, meeting, greeting and talking with people as they go; and doing it in a way that looks and sounds sincere. It's evident that they know how to start, develop and end lively and interesting conversations that build rapport - and maybe generate new work opportunities.

Wouldn't you want to be like them and get that feeling of effortless connecting no matter what the event? You can, if you choose to emulate the techniques they use.

You'll already have many of these skills under your belt. We've all had some experience of introducing ourselves, making conversation with people we've not met before, saying our 'goodbyes' and moving on.

Just reading this paragraph may, however, have got the hairs standing up on the back of your neck. You see, not everyone likes this sort of networking environment. In fact, in a study of social fears undertaken in the USA, people rated 'meeting new people in an unfamiliar environment' as a close second to unrehearsed public speaking!

Perhaps it's because we are 'on show', feel we need to "perform" and be at our most witty and charming, that we can also feel nervous, tense and downright irritable before we go. Some of us even feel physically sick beforehand. The psychologists have a term for it (don't they always) 'social phobia'.

The reality is that, depending on the occasion, most of us have some anxiety going into unfamiliar social situations. Yes, it is uncomfortable walking into a room full of people you don't know - and it's even worse when you need to make a good impression. For some reason (your comfort zone, actually) all of your personality and social skills seem to drain away when you feel out of your depth.

But when you do know how to work a room you'll feel better about yourself, make great social and business contacts and, most important of all, you'll be able to make others feel more comfortable. Your confidence will attract them to you and make them want to know you better.

If you are a regular functions-goer you've probably looked round on occasions when your conversation is not going well and sensed that everyone else in the room is completely at ease - but it's not true. In experiments in these circumstances researchers found that whilst most people were feeling "uncertain", to others they appeared nice and relaxed. So don't believe that it's only you who feels worried and apprehensive on these occasions; the vast majority of the attendees are likely to feel exactly the same as you! The exceptions, of course, are the connectors who, nervous or not, know exactly what to do.

Let's get a handle on the social 'rules' of networking situations like these. When you are in a "business social" situation, the normal social rules you work to in everyday life change somewhat. Here's the key areas of difference:

The social rules of working a room

- **People expect to be approached by "strangers"**

If you were walking down the street and a stranger approached you, you'd most likely take a step back and be on your guard. The rules are reversed in cocktail party and similar 'business function' situations, however. There, it's polite and accepted practice, to move around the room introducing yourself. As a result people expect to be approached by people they don't know and, nine times out of ten, will positively welcome it.

- **People want to move around**

In my experience a lot of people new to networking have difficulty with this. They feel that once they've latched onto a conversation partner or two it is impolite to move on and their networking efforts end right there. In reality, at functions where people are there to meet others and interact, they want to move around and make new contacts. This fact leads nicely to the next social protocol...

- **Conversations can be short**

If you want to work a room effectively it means your conversations have to be short - but short doesn't necessarily mean superficial. It's quite possible to have a thought provoking, stimulating ten minute conversation with a new contact that builds all the rapport you need. Where appropriate you can gain their 'permission to stay in touch' (more later) so that you can explore the areas you discussed in more detail another time.

The social scientists put the average conversation in a networking situation at around 15 minutes, and experienced event-goers will recognise that this equates to six potentially new contacts in an average drinks reception. That's good going, if you know how to choose your conversations with contacts you wish to build rapport with.

- **Overselling is a sin**

Picture the scene, Jack, the double glazing salesman you've just met, has got you pinned in the corner of the room. The cocktail party guests drift past and there's a hum of polite social chitter chatter. But not for you and Jack. He's determined to use this networking function to make a sale. "After all, that's what all this networking is about", he says. His hard sell tactics lead you to a feeling that you won't get out of the place alive unless you give in to his verbal assault and say "yes".

Sounds a ridiculous scenario, doesn't it. Not quite so far fetched, as it's happened to me! But I use the story to illustrate the point. Nobody wants to be sold to at a networking function. It's not good social or business practice, and your chances of success are not good anyway.

Business socials are for rapport building and identifying areas of mutual interest. It's a time for Jack the double glazing salesman to find out a little about me, to ask about my interests, my family, my home - anything except whether I want or need double glazing.

If I think he seems like a nice chap and gains my trust, I'll probably reciprocate and ask what he does for a living. Maybe then we'll get to talking about his business. If I am in the market for double glazing and what he tells me leads me to think that it's worth considering what I should do with my windows, then he's done his job. People buy from people they trust, and trust has to be earned.

How to meet the people you want to meet

Working the room isn't about buzzing around the premises introducing yourself and having fleeting, half-conversations with fellow guests. Sure, it's one way to meet a lot of folk, but it's unlikely that you'll have given yourself sufficient time to make an impact.

That's not to decry this approach, however. I'd much rather someone did this (and it takes courage to do it) than sit in the corner talking to no one, or stay with the same conversation partner until you've exhausted all topics.

Nevertheless, there is a better way - the way the real 'room workers' operate - and much of it depends on research. I've already told you about the real potency of doing your research for business functions. Focusing in advance on who is likely to be most relevant to you, and where you can add most value to them, is a superb strategy for concentrating your efforts on meeting a few people rather than try to "press the flesh" with everyone in the room in the style of a politician in the race for the White House.

At pure social functions, the scenario changes a little. You could ask the host in advance for a run-down of who's coming, and a typed copy of the invitee list, but its unlikely you'll get the results you are looking for, as you'll appear somewhat cold and mercenary in the process. Not a good start. The way the pro's do it at social gatherings is by asking non-threatening and "soft" questions of the host.

Get a 'feel' for your fellow guests

Now get into character (and your party clothes) and visualise this...you have been invited to drinks at a business associate's house. You anticipate knowing no-one there. How do you suss out who's who, and identify those people who are most likely to see your value to them.

Talking to *anyone* is great fun if you ask the right questions and are genuinely interested in them. But you bought this book in order to learn the secrets of the champion networkers, so here goes....

You arrive at the home of your contact and the drinks reception is in full swing, how do you get a "feel" for the nature of the attendees?

When you've said "hello" to the host and entered into some social chit chat, say "You've got a full house here, are many people local?" Most hosts would then identify any neighbours that have been invited. You could then follow on naturally with other questions about the group.

'Is there anyone else from our [sector/profession] here?' Your host will usually be able to tell you who is in your line of business - and often will give you an idea what the other guests do with their time too. If your host doesn't; say "I don't know anyone [only know a few folk] here tonight. Would you mind giving me a quick run down of a few of the people to help me to settle in?"

This is an unusual question but sometimes it needs to be asked. You've stated your reason why you've asked it; you want to settle in quickly, and your host will understand your position. They'll normally do one of two things, depending on how well they know you and the time they have.

Either, they'll give you a quick run-down of guests, which usually includes their profession and place of origin or they'll offer to introduce you to someone. The run-down of guests is great for a connector because this is the closest thing they will get to a written guest list in the business context.

Ask two conversation starters

When talking to guests the top connectors have two questions in their armoury that they bring out when the right conditions arise.

They ask 'how do you know the host?' This question usually elicits information about the relationship between host and guest and, if it's a business one, they usually say what area of business they are in. If not, its an easy follow-up question to ask "and what line of business are you in?"

The other question is to ask your fellow guest(s) how many people they know at the function. In answer, if they know a few, they usually provide a little 'potted history of who's who and their relationship with them.

Not only are these safe conversation topics (your fellow guest can reveal as much or as little as they prefer) they also provide the sign posts for the connector on where to go next. The answers give him some background information to guide the conversation and inform him how best he might be able to add value to his future conversation partner.

Now, how to meet that person who you would like to get to know better. A sophisticated guest, on hearing you say that you are in a similar field or that you have contacts in that sector may say "I'll introduce you later". Sounds too good to be true, and it usually is.

Instead, and depending on the rapport you have created with your conversation partner you may say "as we're in the same field, I'd be very interested in meeting (fellow guest) I wonder, would you mind introducing me later?" Most fellow guests will say yes and offer to do so when you've finished your conversation. But sometimes, for whatever reason, it doesn't happen (your intended contact has moved elsewhere in the room, is engrossed in conversation or your existing conversation partner has simply forgotten or is reticent about doing it). Don't despair, it doesn't make much difference anyway.

All you do now is approach your contact and say, "Hello, I'm.....". I hope you don't mind me introducing myself but I was talking with Stephanie earlier who was telling me that you are in the (sector/profession). I work with 'XYZ Corporation'....and explain the relevance. Ask questions about their situation, don't launch into your life history.

There are other ways, of course, all of which are valuable in getting you into a conversation which can provide a springboard for other connections. You could say, for example, "I hope you don't mind, I don't know anyone here but you looked friendly so I thought I'd introduce myself....I'm [] from Dee Industries may I join you?"

Ease your way into groups

You can even use this approach with a group of people if you feel confident about yourself. (More on breaking into groups later.) A tip first though - listen to what the group is talking about before you attempt to enter it. For all you know it may be something very private, and your perfectly executed approach could be rebuffed for that reason alone.

One classic way to make people in the group feel good is to say "you look as if you are (having fun/enjoying yourselves/having an interesting discussion) would you mind if I joined you?". The vast majority of the people will open up and welcome you because you've explained your rationale for joining them. That's where the value of having half an ear on the tone and the topic of the conversation before you join in is vital.

If the discussion topic is something you can contribute to from your own knowledge, great. If not, you can still join but be prepared to listen and ask intelligent questions based on the discussion. It's a harder road, but you'll learn something and will have demonstrated that you are interested in them and their perspective on the subject.

In the business setting getting to meet the people you want to meet can be much easier. Try these strategies for size.

Don't forget your brief

If you are a member of the host organisation's team, make sure you all get together beforehand for a pre-event briefing.

The purpose is to discuss who is coming to your event (e.g. a seminar) whether anyone knows specific contacts already, and identify which of your colleagues would also wish to meet them. It's then a simple task of agreeing to introduce them an appropriate time during the function. So far, so basic. However, you would be amazed how many organisations I've trained that do not hold pre-event briefings. As a result, the host team has no idea who each other would like to meet, or who should be responsible for looking after whom.

In practice this means that some contacts get smothered with attention from several hosts whilst others are hardly spoken to, or even acknowledged!

In practice

A classic example of where a team of hosts needs to work together to maximise the effectiveness of their contact making is the Big 5 accountancy firms. One far-sighted firm a few years back recognised that its hosts (specialists from the various areas of the business line audit, tax, corporate finance and management consultancy) were gaining few new opportunities from its highly acclaimed, but costly, tax and accountancy update seminars. These events usually attracted well over 200 delegates but seemed to bring in very little new business.

To find out why the organisers of the next event put a static camera high up in the corner of the room so that it could constantly observe the proceedings. When the film was analysed the conclusions were dynamite! It became patently clear why they were not getting the business they should from the event.

Here's a snapshot of the conclusions:

Because they didn't have a briefing session for hosts before the event, no one had any responsibility for 'looking after' specific clients and prospective clients. This meant that hosts simply did their 'own thing' on the day.

The outcome was that some clients were spoken to by several hosts, whilst others hardly got a word from anyone. And the worst sin of all, some prospective clients were never spoken to at all!

The reason was easy to fathom, and had a lot to do with the firm's organisation of the event, and individual's 'comfort zones'. As there was no agreed plan of who should talk to whom, hosts tended to talk either with their

colleagues or with clients with whom they felt most comfortable. Left out in the cold were other clients and the group of people they needed to impress most, their prospective clients - many of whom were not known personally by the hosts.

On playing back the video footage the senior partners of the firm were horrified to see that key decision makers at some of their "top target" client organisations were not spoken to at all by hosts apart from the receptionist giving out the name badges. One can only guess at the impression left in the minds of those "target" people, but friendly, caring and professional don't feature highly.

No wonder very few new business opportunities were generated at the function. The hosts were not even getting to first base and speaking to all guests. They failed the "common courtesy" test - but resolved to put it right. Over the next year they implemented changes that transformed the pay back from their events.

Here's how they did it....

Plan the action, action the plan.

They now hold hosts' briefings before every event, going through the guest list, identifying who knows whom, and allocating responsibility for making contact with them. As a consequence everyone knows exactly what they have to do; and the need to introduce contacts to others has created a great deal more interaction at their events. Previously there was a subdued "hum" of conversation at such functions. Now there is an energy about the place as people move around, are introduced to new contacts and start building new relationships.

Work as a team, and have your target contacts brought to you.

By knowing, as a team, which specialist colleague wishes to be introduced to a contact of another, the whole effort of networking became easier. Instead of a group of hosts working as individuals and scouring the room looking at name badges in the hope of locating the next contact on their responsibility list, they could literally have their contact brought to them.

It worked like this; when a colleague found himself talking to a target contact of another, at an appropriate point in the conversation he would say "when we were talking about this event my colleague (John Smith) expressed a real interest in meeting you today. Perhaps I can introduce you to him. He's a specialist in....".

Feedback on this approach was immensely positive. The vast majority of delegates were pleased that someone had expressed a deep interest in meeting them and were happy to have been introduced. It helped them to network. The added advantage to the host was that once they had introduced their guest to John Smith, after a suitable period of time they could make their excuses "I see a client of mine over there and must have a quick word", leave the conversation and get on with the job of connecting with others.

A good reception desk can transform your business

To meet the people you want to meet, easily and professionally, try this approach: get the reception desk at your function (it even works at other people's events too!) to let you know when your target contact has arrived.

In practice this means that you will either arrange for the receptionist to bring the newly arrived guest directly to you, or ask them to inform you when your contact has arrived.

Unusual? Yes, but if it is done with decorum, the process works like a charm. The conversation lines go something like this:

You go to the person manning the reception desk and say: "There are three people I'd really like to meet today (mark them discreetly on the receptionist's checklist). When they arrive would you bring them over to me by saying 'Mr Timperley really wanted to meet you today and asked if I would let him know when you arrived Mr. Jones. Would mind if I introduced you to him?'".

Done properly by the receptionist most guests will be flattered and will gladly be introduced to you - at which point you say "Hello Mr. Jones, I'm John Timperley a specialist in (.....). I hope you don't mind (Angela) our receptionist bringing you over but I've found to my cost in the past that I spend most of my time on these occasions looking at people's name badges! I'm very glad you could make it today. (If you have other people with you at this point you would introduce them too saying "can I introduce to?" Then, if you know it, give the job title or area of specialisation of the person you've just been talking to, and a bit about what you were talking about. It goes like this:

"Can I introduce you to Terry Holding. Terry is Finance Director of A. & V. Holdings one of my engineering sector clients. We were just talking about whether the recession in the US is likely to have significant impact here."

So, in the space of less than 30 seconds you could have explained your rationale for having your guest brought to you, introduced your existing conversation partner and brought your new guest right up to speed with your topic of conversation - hopefully one on which he will have a view. (If not you'll need to change tack to his interests later).

If the function is not one which you are hosting it's more likely that the reception desk personnel will only agree to telling you when your 'target' contact has arrived and pointing him out to you. That's fine. This action alone has saved you all that time wandering the room surreptitiously peering at name badges (and not all functions have name badges anyway). You would then go into your normal introduction when a suitable opportunity presents itself.

What colour are you?

Once they get their teeth into how much more professional they can be in organising themselves to meet the people they want to meet, my clients often get very scientific about the approach. Here are a few organisational tips you may wish to try, each with their own pros and cons.

- Colour code guest badges into clients, 'hot' prospects and others. You could put a spot of coloured felt tip pen in the top corner of the badge for example. This is a good way for the hosts to know which category the person they are talking to fits into, which is valuable to a point, but has the severe downside that you'll need an answer to the question "why have I got a blue spot on my badge, and his is red?" You don't want to appear mercenary by sorting the clients and hot prospects from the rest. Someone who feels they have been 'downgraded' simply by the colour of the spot on their badge will be upset.
- A more subtle way of achieving the same result (although sharp-eyed guests may still ask the same question) is to use a different typeface or permutation of capitals and lower case to differentiate between the groups of contacts. For example you could put all client names in capitals, but not prospects in initial capitals only. Other guests may have the name and their company in capitals.

Host a party within a party

In the right venue and with a sizeable guest list (more than 50) one of the very best approaches to meeting the people you want to meet is this:

Instead of just having a single refreshment point (tea/coffee etc) have four, preferably in each corner of the room. Allocate an appropriate number of hosts to point and then divide your guests into four sets in a way that is logical to you. It could be by type of organisation, job function, sector etc. You now have four sets of hosts and guests.

As an example, a computer services company I worked with had at one refreshment point:

- . 4 hosts
- . 8 clients
- . 4 target clients
- . 4 other guests

They colour coded these people's badges quite deliberately and boldly and on arrival the receptionist told them that they are at the green coffee point.

What's the advantage of this approach? There are several:

- You break a large guest population down into a manageable size - you create a party within a party.
- You select who you wish to be in your party for your own contact making and business development purposes.
- You can research the latest news on your guests much more easily, because you have a smaller number to handle.
- You can get endorsement from your clients when you are talking to target contacts, and they will see the rapport you have with your clients. Your clients can be your very best salesperson.
- As long as the refreshments are replenished properly, there's never a big queue.

- It's much easier to introduce nearby colleagues and generally create a group 'feel' - particularly if you've selected guests for your group on the basis of their interests, job roles etc.

There's also a group psychology about 'belonging'. Whilst no one said there's a rule that guests can't wander wherever they want in the room, you'll find that 'group norms' apply, and people tend to stay together. No one likes to be the odd one out, and be a green badge in a red area!

This approach works well in a pre and post-seminar situation where the 'green' group get back together at the same point after the seminar. This gives hosts the opportunity to get round guests asking what they thought of it, and gain permission to stay in touch where appropriate.

It works less well at cocktail type functions where people are present for a couple of hours and may simply wish to mingle throughout the room. Nevertheless, the organisational rationale for adopting it is a good one, and guests do welcome the feeling of a home base.

In practice

Alumni evenings.

Organisations who want to keep in touch with their former employees, particularly the big consulting firms, accountants and legal firms, often have alumni bashes.

In order to help them track down former colleagues at the event itself they often have areas of the room allocated to 60's, 70's 80's etc., the decade in which the alumni were employees with the business. It helps enormously in making sure that guests (and hosts) get the most out of the event.

Learn from the champion 'room workers'

The top connectors have other techniques for making sure they get the best chance to meet people they want to meet. Put together, these "tricks of the trade" give them the edge.

The sophisticated room worker's technique is to face the door so that they can see their clients, friends, potential new contacts - even people they want to avoid - enter the room, but without taking their focus off you and what you are saying.

Nothing is calculated to destroy rapport more quickly than gazing round the room when you should have your attention on your conversation partner. We've all had it done to us, and inevitably we feel like a worthless worm as the person we are trying to interest clearly has other attractions.

Join contacts in the line for food and drink, because small talk is easy. A "soft" approach to making contact with people is to do it in the buffet line or at the bar. It's easy to comment on anything to do with the situation and start the conversation ball rolling. Just one word of advice before we get into some examples of 'opening remarks' - make sure your comments are positive ones. If not, you're in danger of your new conversation partner marking you down as a moaning, whingeing minnie. Why? Because their 'sample' of your tone and attitude is one of negativity. Even if your comments are valid, it's best to save them for later in the conversation when they've got a more positive picture of your attitude.

At the buffet, depending on your conversational style, you could say anything from:
"There's certainly plenty of choice here" or "They've obviously worked hard on the buffet" or
"I think my diet may be going out of the window tonight".

These are innocuous comments with a complimentary twist, designed to elicit a comment from your fellow 'muncher'. They are an ice-breaker from which you can move to introduce yourself or discuss other aspects of the event.

At the bar, for example, depending on the circumstances, you could say:

"They look busy (quiet) tonight" or "I've not stopped all day, and I'm ready for a cold drink now" or "why don't you go before me, mine's quite a large order (if it is!)". Your contact will be appreciative of your gesture and open up easily.

Again, these are just gentle "connecting" comments that may or may not lead to more in depth discussions; your own instinct will tell you which. However, even if the conversation is very short, the connector has done his job in

engaging his contact and made himself known. It will be much easier later to start a conversation because they now already know each other.

Keep close, at the right time

At pre-event refreshments like seminars or conferences, the best connectors know that timing is the key to making the most of who they sit next to. Just this move alone could make the difference between your landing your next piece of work, or the assignment going to your competitor.

Engineering who you sit next to requires good planning and a bit of streetwise sense. The connector does it like this; he's at the seminar to learn the latest developments in outsourcing and, because he's already reviewed the guest list, he's set himself the goal of meeting three prospective clients. In particular would like to meet Karen Fenwick the marketing director of Academy plc.

He knows what Karen looks like because he's asked the receptionist to let him know when she has arrived. But he's not immediately walked over and introduced himself; instead, he's checked his watch - ten minutes to go until the start of the seminar. Too soon. He bides his time for another five minutes then makes his move, introduces himself and gets into polite conversation about her business and issues in the sector/profession (which he's ready up about of course, as part of his research into the three contacts).

She's impressed by his knowledge by the time delegates are called to take their seats in the seminar/conference room.

"I've enjoyed our conversation", he says "would you mind if I joined you in the seminar?". Unless there's a specific reason why not (and there could be) her answer is "yes, of course". And he takes the opportunity to make a few pertinent comments to demonstrate his knowledge and build a bond for the duration of the event. Now that's the difference between a run of the mill networker and a real connector.

Stand at the crossroads

Where would you stand if you wanted to meet most people at a business function, in the corner of the room or the middle? Actually, its a trick question because neither answer is right.

The psychologists who have studied this arena of social interaction have, however, provided some great clues for us to use. Think again about what people do when they attend such gatherings. They get a drink from the bar area, if there's buffet style food they'll visit that table too. And they'll invariably need to pay a visit to the boys or girls room sometime during the event. When you know the locations of these "honey pots" you'll know the invisible thoroughfare that people will use.

One connector friend of mine when not seeking to make contact with anyone specific used to station himself midway between the buffet and the toilets, as he figured that most folk would come past sooner or later!

Try this

Next time you are at a function observe the flows of people and see if there is an invisible highway. Be aware that where you position yourself in the room could have a lot to do with how many opportunities you have to meet people.

Apply some common sense to this principle though. If you find that the crossroads of the invisible thoroughfare between the bar and the food is the middle of the dance floor, you won't do your credibility as a networker too much good if you stand here alone, drink in hand!

Arm yourself with the networker's tackle

Every profession has its "tools of the trade" and networking is no different. A plumber's bag will contain all sorts of wrenches, washers, pliers and other devices to deal with all situations - likewise a doctor's case will have his stethoscope, blood pressure kit and essential pills, bandages and potions. Here we'll cover the tackle a connector needs to use in order to be truly effective. We've explored the uses of some of them already, but now let's put them into the context of the connector's 'must have's.'

There are only six key items but each has its own vital role to play in helping you to achieve your goal of connecting with the right individuals. As you'll see, they are mainly used in the business networking context but are adaptable for pure social situations too.

- **A host's briefing on who's who, and what's what**

If you are hosting a function make sure that you get yourself organised in advance.

In the social context, even if it's just you and your partner hosting at home, have a chat about who's going to be responsible for what - the food, the drink, the entertainment, the clearing of dishes...even the washing up. It's too late on the night to be arguing over the dinner table about who should be doing what. Of course it happens, and it's probably happened to you. So plan in advance. Lessen the risk of misunderstanding and strife, and maximise your opportunity to connect with your guests in a convivial atmosphere.

The business parallel to this is a formal hosts' briefing. Whilst you are unlikely to be worrying about who's making the food and scrubbing the dishes, you should be considering who will be looking after whom, who wishes to meet which guests and what roles you will play (if any). Will someone meet and greet, for example? Will someone be responsible for drinks? Is anyone to say a few words, and when? Who will be in charge of providing key information on guests' backgrounds and latest business activities? I could go on. Much depends on the size and nature of the event, but the message should be clear. Leave out the hosts' briefing and you leave everything to chance; it's a gamble connectors prefer not to have.

- **Business cards - your mini long term advertisement**

We've talked about the power of business cards earlier so we won't cover that ground again. This is about making sure that you have them in your "tool kit" in the same way that a doctor wouldn't dream of leaving home without his stethoscope.

Business cards are a permanent reminder of who you are and what you do, and double up nicely as a mini notepad on which to jot comments and agreed actions. But they are no use to you in your desk drawer when you are out at a function, or in your briefcase in the cloakroom when you are in a reception.

You need them with you at all times. That means checking BEFORE you go, that you have sufficient for the occasion. They may be in your wallet, in a special card case or in your suit pocket, but wherever you normally keep them make sure that you are fully stocked.

Running out of cards is like a doctor running out of essential tablets. It doesn't look professional or engender feelings of trust and competence.

Amateurs have dozens of reasons why they haven't got any cards to give.

"I've just given my last one away"

"I'm having them re-done"

"Would you believe it, they are in my other suit. I changed it only this morning."

Connectors don't have any excuse for not having them, because they've checked. By the way, it's a great idea to keep a small supply in the glove compartment of your car, in your briefcase, your wallet and even in a pocket of your sports bag. That way, if ever you do need to replenish your stock or hand one to a contact, you have a reserve supply reasonably close by in most circumstances.

On the social side, cards can come into play too. In some circles "social cards" containing your name, home address and telephone numbers are the accepted norm, in others they aren't. But if you want to be a top connector, get some. It's not pretentious to give your personal details to someone you have met socially rather than in a business context. Just the obvious word of warning though; make absolutely sure that you really do want to give your card to a new contact. Not everyone likes to take lots of calls at home, or divulge their address to relative strangers.

Nevertheless, social cards are great to give to your friends and appropriate acquaintances, particularly, for example, if you move home or change contact numbers.

- **A 4 x 2 inch identity**

Have you ever arrived at a business function and found that your name had somehow been missed off the guest list and the organiser did not have a pre-typed name badge for you? Have you then further suffered the indignity of wearing a hand-written one?

Whilst the organisers have done their best to correct the mistake you somehow feel less of a person than those others in the room with a perfectly typed name badge. In truth, your credibility has been dented by yours not being the same as everyone else's. And you feel it in your confidence when you introduce yourself.

"I'm global president of Amazon Widgets Inc., the largest supplier in the USA" you say, but your hand written badge somehow chops the legs from under you (blaming the organisers, though true, appears a bit weak).

The solution? When the connector is telephoning the organisation for a copy of the guest list (next on our tool kit agenda) he'll also check that his name and company details are correct. It's a simple ten second job that makes sure that he looks the part.

And just to be on the safe side, he'll also have his own badge with him! Many organisations these days issue their hosts with classy looking, but inexpensive, plastic or metal badges containing their name and organisation logo. A serious connector will have half a dozen made up with his name on and, like his business cards, keep them handy. If, for whatever reason, a hand-written card is the only option despite his call to check (it does happen) then he can use his own. No fuss, and totally professional, because he has a contingency plan that works.

- **Who's coming?**

The guest list is a critical item in the connector's tool kit. It's his blueprint for the function, his guide to the contact making opportunities available.

If your own organisation is hosting the function then obtaining a list isn't much of a problem. If it's someone else's event, it's more difficult - but only slightly. All you do is pick up the phone and say "Hello, this is John Timperley, I'm due to attend the (xyz function) on Wednesday and just thought I'd have quick check to make sure you received my confirmation.

"You have? Good. By the way, some people find the spelling of my name a bit tricky it's TIM-PER-LEY, OK, great. I'm looking forward to it. By the way, you wouldn't happen to have a guest list you could fax or e-mail to me would you? I was just wondering who else might be there".

By the time you get to asking for the guest list you'll probably have built some rapport with your telephone conversation partner. (I normally mention some of the mis-spellings of my name as they check through the list. "You wouldn't believe it but I've had Tipperary, Timpoli, Tripperley, Timpani and even been called Tim Pearly before now" I'll say ... and they're all true!

Unless there's a very good reason why you can't have it - and sometimes there is - most organisations will let you have a copy. And that's your chance to use it, professionally, as a way to focus your contact making efforts.

On the social side you could always telephone your host, if you know them well enough, for a brief run down of who is going so that you will feel more comfortable about the occasion and dress appropriately.

- **Intelligence that makes the difference**

A piece of information which took a manager in an accounting practice five minutes to locate and two minutes to read set him on the road to accelerated partnership. Here's how he did it.

As part of the firm's host team for an accounting update seminar, he'd been allocated a 'target' contact to speak to at the event who was MD of a printing Company. As part of his connector's research he'd had a quick look at the company's accounts and logged on to the Reuters database to find out the latest news on the company.

A three paragraph story in a specialist printing journal, reported that the company had recently made a £5m acquisition of another business in the sector. Not very big, not very newsworthy - but that piece of information was to transform that accountancy practice's relationship with their target contact.

When he met the MD at the accounting update function, after some initial pleasantries and social conversation, the manager said, 'How's the acquisition going?' Visibly taken aback that the manager should know about the small acquisition, the printing company MD went on to tell him some of the positives and negatives of the situation.

More importantly, when he got back to his office the MD told all of his senior managers about the accountancy firm down the road that was really 'on the ball'. The result? In very short order the accountants were asked to provide a quote for the company's audit and tax work (which they successfully negotiated). The printing company has further expanded to become one of the firm's most valued clients – all because of five minutes' research and a three paragraph news story. That's the power of intelligence. It's the difference between saying 'What does your company do?' (the no research approach) and 'How's the recent acquisition going?' I've no need to ask you which question you think is going to impress most.

- **I'll jot that down if I may –the essential notepad and pen**

Capturing information on what you've agreed to do for a contact you've met can be done in a couple of ways. One way is to, with their permission, write on the back of their card, thereby linking what you're to do with the person's details. A second, and perhaps more elegant approach, is to keep a very small high quality notepad and pen with you at all times.

Any good stationer can provide one about the size of a very slim cigarette box, or even smaller. I've seen silver cased ones with a small integral pen too.

Show that you are serious about your networking, and your commitment to do things for others by writing down key details of what you've agreed. A notepad is ideal for use at a truly social function where it may not be 'good form' to ask for a card. In these, or business function situations if you've agreed to do something you simply say 'I'll just jot that down if I may so that I don't forget.' Then you'll whip out your mini notepad and capture the info. At an appropriate time after the event (the same day or evening is best for recall) add any additional information that is relevant to your longer term connecting goals with this person – their likes or dislikes, the main points of your conversation etc.

Be the great host

No matter whether you are hosting a function at your own home or are hosting on behalf of your organisation, you'll want the event to go well and, on a personal level, to be thought of as an excellent host.

Whilst most of the tips on being a good host are obvious, there are a few 'moves' that help connectors make their events enjoyable and productive. The start point is to make people feel comfortable. The reason is that the vast majority of people don't feel comfortable in pure social or business-social situations. And if they are uncomfortable they shrink back into their 'shell' interact less and generally don't have a good time. The host's primary objective then is to make people feel welcome and 'at home'. They do it like this:

- **Move forward to meet and greet**

The psychologists have done a lot of work in this area and concluded that if you move forward to meet and greet people, their impressions of you will be far more favourable than if you waited for them to enter your personal space to greet you. So, if you want people to think more of you even before you've opened your mouth just move forward with open gestures and say 'hello'. Handshakes, hugs etc depend on the situation you find yourself in. This meeting and greeting stage lays the foundation for making contacts feel welcome and treated as 'special'.

- **Break the ice with food and drink**

As a host you have the ideal opportunity to speak to anyone at your function by asking if they are Ok for food and liquid refreshments. In most situations it's appropriate for the host to check if the arrangements are to their liking.

I've seen great connectors do nothing more all evening than to approach individuals and groups of people and ask questions varying from 'Have you had anything to eat yet?' or 'Just to let you know, the food is available now', through to 'Just checking that you've had something to eat...yes, was it alright'? You get the picture. By asking such questions, not only are you being a courteous and good host in looking after guest's interests, you are also mingling with a purpose and showing that you are in control of the situation. What's more, once you've broken the ice with anyone by asking a question like those above, it's easy to continue the conversation in any direction you like.

- **Meet my important friend...learn the art of introductions**

Great connectors have developed the skill of introducing others. We've already talked about creating your own 30 second preview which positions you as an open and interesting person to talk to, now let's look at how to help others through your introductions.

The way the best room workers do it is to introduce people as if they are *really* important to them. They provide additional explanatory information with a compliment weaved into it. Here's a few examples so that you get the idea:

'Jane, I'd like you to meet Jack. Jack and I go way back to school days. We used to sit together at the back of the class planning our next bit of fun'

'Joe, can I introduce Janice.

Janice has just advised us on one of our biggest property transactions'

'Eric, this is Marie, our next door neighbour and very good friend'

Connectors do their best to make introductions in this way. Where it's appropriate, they'll also provide some detail on the other person too. Taking the example above as a model...

'Eric, this is Marie, our next door neighbour and very good friend.

(then, to Marie) Eric's a doctor at GMP Hospital. He specialises in the study of children's medicine.

In this example, the connector host has taken the time (literally a few seconds) to give a potted history of both people, flattered them at the same time, and provided plenty of 'hooks' for them to start a lively and interesting conversation. Contrast that with the usual 'Jane, this is Eric, type of introduction.'

At first extending your introductions in this way may feel awkward, but once you get into the swing of it you'll find that you do it without thinking.

- **Help your guests feel at home**

It's worth emphasising again that the host's major role is to make their guests feel comfortable. They do that by making sure that they are fed and watered properly, are in a position to enjoy convivial conversation (that's where good introductions come in) and are seen to be looking after their guests.

It's only when people feel comfortable that they begin to open up and share their views, insights and information. Trying to force a relationship before the comfort stage is counter-productive as all those salespeople who have attempted to sell timeshare homes will know.

In practice

People remember the interest, warmth and enthusiasm they feel from you, not the words. The best opening line is a smile and 'hello, I'm...'

Turning a social 'chat' into a business conversation

Conversation in a business setting; a cocktail party, the refreshments session before or after a seminar or conference etc can be compared to driving a car – you need the right gear at the right time.

First gear is the start of the conversation, the small talk area; second is achieved by changing from social pleasantries into a more business-focused discussion. Third is exploring specific aspects of the business conversation that are of interest to both parties, and fourth gear is the zone where things have gone well and you are seeking your conversation partner's permission to stay in touch with them.

The changing gears in a car allegory is a good one because as any driver will tell you, trying to start off in third gear, for example, usually requires much greater effort than in first and, indeed, the car (just like your conversation) is in danger of stalling. Why? Because you've entered at the wrong point, skipped a couple of gears, and such a conversation often gets off to a juddering start.

Just as an advanced driver moves effortlessly through the gears, so too the experienced connector. The advanced driver also has the knowledge to know when it is possible to jump gears, as does the connector. But for the

purposes of this book let's assume that you work through the conversation gears in a logical order with people you've not met before.

The emphasis in this section is placed on conversation in a business setting, as most people have difficulty in the following areas:

- Starting a conversation with someone they don't know
- Turning a social 'chat' into a business discussion
- Gaining their conversation partner's permission to stay in touch
- Following up in an elegant and effective way

Some connectors may take as little as five minutes to go through the gears, whilst in other conversations the stages may take an hour or more. And some conversations, of course, will draw to a halt at any point between first and fourth gear. There may be a number of reasons for this, but you'll know by now that the critical factors to move it along are:

- Using your self-introduction to interest your conversation partner in you and what you have to say
- Building rapport in the very early stages of the discussion, and continuing it through
- Using non-threatening questions to help guide the direction of the chat
- Listening actively so that you really hear what is being said and can assess the implication of the messages

Conversation is not a mechanical process and can meander about all over the place in real life. Nevertheless, the various stages of the model do help you to get a feel for where you are in the discussions at any point in time.

Now you know the theory, let's move on to some of the specific actions attached to each stage. Everyone is different, and each situation you find yourself in will require an intelligent and tailored approach, but nevertheless you need a number of options at your disposal to use as required.

The first thing to do is to be prepared for conversation by keeping yourself up to speed with the latest big news.

What's happening?

Keeping up with the news doesn't mean digesting the Financial Times line by line, but it does mean picking up the major news stories of the day. What's happening in business, sport, the economy and politics are good – even the weather forecast is valuable! Most people can get what they want from a ten minute scan of the daily newspaper or picking up the TV and radio news broadcasts.

If you don't know what your next conversation partner will be interested in talking about current news is obviously a good start point. However, if you don't know what's going on then that conversation 'door' is closed, and you'll be at a disadvantage to those who obviously do.

Think back a few years – no-one would have wanted to be the last person in the room to know that John F Kennedy had been shot. To be in that position would give the impression that you didn't have your finger on the pulse.

In a ridiculous way, the same feeling of 'not in touch' can be engendered in the mind of your sports fanatic contact if you don't know the result of last night's big game. The message is, do your homework and be interested in what's going on. It won't take long, and it will pay great dividends in making it easier for you to start and join in with 'social' conversations.

Prepare your views

Now that you've heard the latest news, think about your views on it. What are the implications of what's happening? Thinking through your views in the way will help you to articulate your opinions or thoughts on what will happen next far better than if you had to give them 'off the cuff'. Preparing your views in this way involves nothing more than active reading or listening.

What will the attendees be thinking about?

Most business functions are called with a specific purpose in mind, to provide information, to inform of changes, to promote something, to celebrate success, mark an occasion etc.

Whatever the reason, give some consideration to what the attendees are likely to be thinking about. For example, if you're attending a business awards function they'll be wondering who's won in the various categories. The top

connector considers where the 'collective mind' is and thinks in advance about their own opinion. Who should win? Why? Who won last year? etc.

They can then have the confidence to discuss the awards with anyone they meet in their networking, and sound both knowledgeable and interesting.

Opening lines

Opening lines are like placing the gear stick into first. There's no need for fancy moves at this stage. That's why the selection of openers below will seem banal. They do nothing more than get you started on the conversation road.

The fail-safe line, mentioned already is 'hello, can I introduce myself, I'm...'. It's a very rare occasion indeed when a potential conversation partner says 'no'!

You've got the conversation going, so what's next? Much depends on the circumstances of your meeting, but you could employ permutations of 'neutral' questions like those below. Bear in mind that it's a conversation, not an interrogation, so you'll need to play your part in providing information back to them. If the words don't sound right to you on these pages that's partly because small talk doesn't easily transfer onto paper. Get a feel for the type of questions to ask, and use whatever words and phrases you feel comfortable with. How about these first gear questions to get your conversation off to a smooth start.

Have you come far?
How was the traffic?
Did you manage to get a parking spot alright?
Have you been here /to this event before?
Do you know many people here?
Have you had anything to eat/drink yet?

Nothing sparkling about any of these, but remember, the aim is to just get the conversation going. It's important in the early stages to share some information about you. The best exponents of this technique do it so that they give information then tag a question on the end so that they get something back. Here's an example:

(on talking about getting to the venue) It seems like the traffic is getting worse just lately. It takes me an extra ten minutes to get to the office on East Street from my home in Anytown. *Is that the same for you?*

Their conversation partner's answer can open up the opportunity for the connector to ask further follow up questions like:

In which area do you live?
Where is your office?
What route do you take?
Do you do a lot of driving in your job
etc

A statement with a question 'tag' is the elegant way for a connector to seek information. Here's another one designed to get a feeling for a conversation partners' leisure interests. At an appropriate point in the conversation (only you will know when) you say...

'It's been a hectic week for me this week, I'm certainly looking forward to my weekend game of golf. It's my way to unwind...*do you play at all?*'

If they do, then your conversation is off and running. If they say 'no' you may say one of:

'What do *you* do with your leisure time?'

or

'Do you play any sports?'

or

'Have you anything special planned for the weekend?'

The question you ask will depend on the person you are speaking to, but you can imagine that the answers you get to those questions will range from yes, they are interested in some sport or other, or they are not. If they are, you'll

explore that, if not you'll leave the subject well alone. Normally people will tell you what they are interested in without having to prise it out of them.

Moving smoothly onto business

At many business functions where people wear name badges it's easy to get onto a business footing by introducing yourself, looking at the person's badge and saying 'What does XYZ Corporation do?' If you already know the company you would probably say 'I see you are with XYZ Corporation...what's your role there?'

If people don't wear badges at the function, as long as you've 'teed up' the social discussion earlier, it's an easy follow on to ask 'and what line of business are you in?' So far so obvious, but how do you really get under the skin of what they and their business are up to at the moment. These three questions will solve your problem:

'Are you busy at the moment?' is the gentlest, but often the most effective, business conversation opener going. You can see that you can easily slot this question in behind your social openers. Indeed, on the right occasion, you can ask it very quickly after you've made your introductions. It's power comes from the fact that however the question is answered there is a natural follow on.

You 'Are you busy at the moment?'

Answer 'No, not really'

You 'Oh, why's that...?'

Or

You 'Are you busy at the moment?'

Answer 'Yes, very'

You 'Oh, why's that...?'

The question and answer, yes or no, is like a fork in the road, and both answers lead you down the highway to a conversation which explores their present situation in the context of their business. Such discussions are normally great for building empathy through careful listening and questioning, and can provide information on areas where you may be able to help.

There are two other alternatives. Not rocket science, but incredibly effective.

The simple question 'How's business?' is broad enough to be non-threatening for most people to answer, but an even better one is 'What do you see on the horizon for your business (or sector) over the next few months?'

Often connectors will 'soften' the question by giving a preamble statement beforehand; something like: 'I see that the Government is still worried about a recession but our business still appears to be holding up well...what do you see on the horizon for your (business/sector) over the next few months?'

Occasionally people are not happy to share in public what's going on in their business with a relative stranger. That's when connectors 'distance' themselves by asking what's happening in the sector instead of their conversation partner's business. In this case they are happy to share what's going on in their industry generally.

Either way, should they choose to answer the question from their sector or own business perspective, in effect, they are telling you the big issues going forward and whilst they may be talking about their sector generally, it's very likely that their comments are steeped in what's going on in their own business situation.

Track back

Often in a wide ranging conversation, the talk may move between social and business chat, or take a route that leads away from an area of particular interest to the connector. This is where they score with active listening and incisive questioning. Luckily, it's not difficult.

What they do is to remember what their conversation partner said earlier about the topic the connector is interested in and, when there's an appropriate break in the conversation he'll say:

'I was interested in your comment earlier about [whatever] *How do you see....?*

Or

'You mentioned earlier that [whatever] *I'd be interested in how you...?*

Normally your conversation partner will be flattered that you have been paying close attention to what he has to say, and will repay you with more information on the area in question.

Converse in context

Gaining an understanding of why people go to business events can often provide a pathway to new opportunities for you. Asking people what attracted them to the event and, if it's an information sharing type of event like a seminar, asking them how the topics covered impact on them and their business is a great way to get a feel for the issues they are facing, and the opportunities they may have.

Try this

Move gently from social to business conversation and avoid any sense of 'selling' by making statements and asking questions. In this way you can identify areas where you or others may be able to help.

Breaking into groups

Working a room by joining a group of people you don't know is one of the hardest things to do in networking. But it becomes much easier if you understand the social psychology of the situation and pick up a few tips from the experts. The first thing to say is that not every group will want you to join them, so take some soundings first by standing close to the group to get the flow of the conversation. Judge for yourself whether it is right to join in. They could be talking about serious business or something of a confidential nature, and the last thing they will want is you, or anyone else, butting in!

If the conversation is a general one and you feel it is OK to join in, make sure that you address your opening remarks to the person who is speaking. This is not only social protocol, it's sound business sense. The social psychologists have proved through experiments that if you address your first comments to anyone other than the speaker (the leader of the group at that time) you alienate the speaker because you've taken their audience away from them. So, speak to the speaker first, engage in the group discussion in the normal way and find a good time later to introduce yourself if people in the group don't already know you.

If you are a member of the host team at a business function, it's much easier to break into the group, because you have a right to do so. You can easily check if everyone has had something to eat and drink and ask any other 'are you alright?' type of questions. This allows you to earn the right to join the group. However, the best way to join a group is to be invited in by others, and the start point is making good eye contact with someone you know already. Often this alone will signal to them that you would like to join in.

It's been great to meet you...Saying goodbye with grace

One of the major difficulties expressed by delegates on my working the room training courses is how to finish a conversation and move on to talk with others. Part of the secret is 'gaining permission to stay in touch (if you want to) and the best way to signal that the chat is drawing to a natural close is to ask for a card. In so doing you can re-state what you have agreed to do.

But what do you do then? You can then make 'moving on' as painless as possible by:

- Introducing them to someone else you know – a colleague, work associate, friend or anyone else you feel comfortable approaching to introduce you new found conversation partner.

- Being brave enough to be up-front about moving on by saying something like 'It's been very nice talking to you, perhaps we can catch up later'. It's the 'perhaps we can catch up later' that softens the leaving line. It says in a few words that you've enjoyed your chat and would like to talk some more another time, and gives them the affirmation that they are liked.

In practice

One management consultant I came across used the line 'I've really enjoyed our conversation. Thank you. I did promise I'd meet a couple of clients here today so I'd better track them down. So, if you'll excuse me...perhaps we can catch up later'

Whether he does or doesn't have clients there that he'd arranged to meet is almost academic. His rationale was that the approach demonstrated professionalism and empathy at the same time. Professionalism in the sense that he had promised something and needed to deliver on it, and empathy by telling his conversation partner that he had enjoyed their chat and expressed an interest in getting back together later.

The chances of them meeting up again are slim, of course, unless he had agreed a specific follow up action and identified ways in which he or others could help.

Ask for a card if you want to gain permission to stay in touch – and close by agreeing a follow up action. Add your elegant leaving line and move on. And after you've had experience doing this a number of times it will become second nature. The key question now is, how do you follow up effectively so that you build on that initial encounter? Let's take a look...