

Making professional connections

By Kathleen D. Pagana, PhD, RN

ARE YOU MAKING CONNECTIONS that benefit your career? Are you comfortable starting a conversation at a networking session? Do you know how to exit a conversation gracefully when it's time to move on?

These are questions and concerns many nurses share. Career success takes more than clinical expertise, management savvy, and leadership skills. Networking can be the critical link to success. This article helps you improve your networking skills by focusing on what to do before, during, and after a networking opportunity.

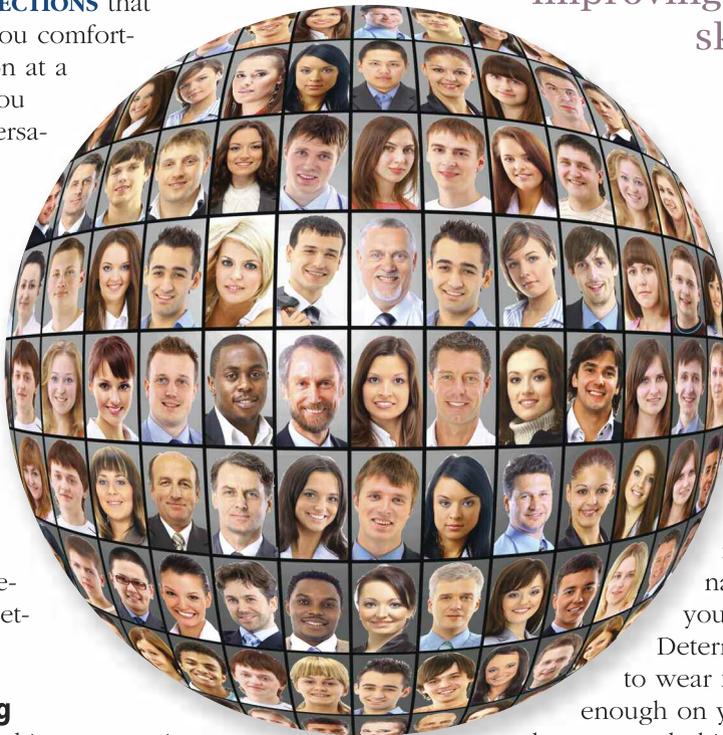
The value of networking

Networking is all about making connections and forming relationships. Business gets done through relationships. These relationships connect you to new colleagues, new opportunities, new information, and different practice settings. For example, at a nursing convention, I met a manager for a large healthcare organization, who told me he needed speakers and asked if I had an interest. This contact has led to more than 50 speaking engagements.

Don't make the mistake of thinking networking occurs only in professional settings. It can happen anywhere. Don't underestimate its power, either. Several years ago, I was at a yoga class when a friend told me her son was seeking a sales position at a laboratory and diagnostic testing company. I had a personal contact at that company, and through this connection, her son was able to get an interview that led to a job. So think of networking as part of your job, not just as an add-on to indulge in when you have time. (See *Expanding your network*.)

Getting ready to network

Before a networking opportunity, be sure to plan. Find



Improving your networking skills can help you climb the career ladder.



out who will be there, and plan to meet at least several new people.

You may be able to ask a colleague to introduce you personally to someone you've been wanting to meet.

Prepare by being well read. Read newspapers, magazines, and key journals or newsletters related to your conference or specialty.

Determine what type of clothing to wear for the event. You'll have

enough on your mind; why worry about your clothing? You don't want to show up at a dressy cocktail party in a business suit, or not attend because you didn't pack the right clothing.

I'm amazed at how many people I meet at networking events who don't have a business card. Handing out a business card is one of the best ways to follow



Expanding your network

Stumped for ways to make more connections? Here are some ideas.

- Join professional organizations.
- Attend professional meetings.
- Serve on committees.
- Volunteer in your community.
- Participate in local sports by joining a league or team.
- Attend cocktail receptions.
- Join a health club or gym.
- Use social media, such as LinkedIn.

How to avoid networking mistakes

The table below lists common networking mistakes, plus tips on how to avoid them.

Networking mistake	How to avoid it
Skipping the networking reception	Arrive early and plan to mingle.
Having a negative attitude	Approach the event with enthusiasm.
Focusing only on your personal agenda	Try to be a resource for others.
Forgetting your business cards	Always carry your business cards.
Connecting only with your friends	Plan to expand your network.
Failing to follow up	Schedule time for following up on the connections you've made.

up and stay connected. Many online businesses, such as VistaPrint.com, offer cards at a low cost.

But don't pass out your business cards as though you're dealing a deck of cards. You want people to ask for your card. To make this happen, ask the other person for his or her card. (See *How to avoid networking mistakes*.)

Networking in action

Networking is active, not passive. Always be ready to introduce yourself. Don't just stand next to someone waiting to be introduced; take the initiative. Put out your hand for a firm handshake and state your name in a confident voice. For example, "Hi, I'm Mary Balon. I'm a nurse case manager."

Small talk is an easy way to start a conversation until you find a commonality. It breaks the ice and makes people feel comfortable. If you have trouble getting a conversation started, use the acronym OAR. With the example below, imagine you're standing next to someone at an ANA convention in Boston.

- **O**bserve. Make an observation. ("It looks as if there are thousands of people here.")
- **A**sk a question. ("Have you attended this conference before?")
- **R**eveal something about yourself. ("This is my first time in Boston.")

You can practice this easy technique anywhere, anytime—for instance, when standing in a cafeteria line, waiting for a meeting to start, or checking out at the grocery store.

Networking no-no's

Networking *doesn't* mean flitting from person to per-

son, handing out business cards and pumping hands with as many people as possible in a brief period of time. If you don't care about the people you meet, they'll sense your insincerity. Instead, show respect, courtesy, and consideration for others. We may forget what people say to us, but we remember how they made us feel. One of the most important things we can offer someone is our full attention. Be a good listener. Focus on being a good resource for others—not on your own agenda.

Don't monopolize those you meet. The last thing you should do is tie people up and prevent them from moving on and meeting others. When it's time to disengage from a conversation, do it gracefully. Here are some polite ways to do it:

"It was great meeting you. I'll let you have some time to speak to others."

"It was great speaking with you. I hope to connect later during the convention."

"Juliana, it has been a pleasure meeting you. Will you excuse me? I see my roommate over there, and I promised I'd catch up with her."

Networking follow-up

Networking doesn't end when the conference or meeting does. If you planned to follow up with someone you met, do it. Once you've returned to work, it's easy to get busy and forget to follow up.

Make following up a priority by scheduling time for it. Look for ways to keep connecting with people. Send notes, meet for lunch, and acknowledge accomplishments. Relay information (useful articles, websites, information about a job opening or other opportunity) to someone who could benefit. Don't connect only when you need a favor.

Building new relationships is the essence of networking. Whom you know and the connections you develop affect your success. The "soft" skill of networking can make a big difference in your career. ★

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