



By Marilynne Deane Mendell

A quiet, slow and steady introvert wins the networking race. And that's a strange way to begin because few people equate networking with a shy, crowd-averse personality trait. What seems to scare most people away from the idea of networking can almost always be attributed to a fear of huge get-togethers with a sea of nameless and unknown faces. The vision of a drowning person getting sucked deeper into a quagmire abyss of sardine-packed bodies flailing cocktails and glad-handing can seem like a zombie party to most AEC professionals. That may be why networking gets rejected by the poor soul who has been tossed more than a few times into the random world of attending events.

However, in reality, a well-orchestrated plan for networking, properly executed and implemented, suits an introvert's personality perfectly. Research shows that a modest, humble person gains trust over the pushy, loud braggart. Relationships get built on an intimate level over time.

To begin with relationship networking, every company needs a focused strategic plan, organization chart, marketing plan and budget. For this plan to work, it's important to set aside time for upfront exercises to set goals. Think: What kind of work does the firm seek? Write that down in the plan. Name target market sectors to gain a wider share of exposure. How many people can effectively develop each sector? Name them and set up an organization chart and place designated employ-

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ees' names along with their sector. Next, identify a peer organization in that sector like the AIA or ULI. Then look for an organization that might service that market sector industry. Try to identify groups without competitors in the membership. If targeting nonprofits, choose associations related directly to museums or botanical gardens or libraries. They all have specialized support associations. Now add that group below the peer group on the organization chart. Look up membership costs, regional and national, locate the national conferences along with future dates. Put these related costs on the chart in different boxes for memberships, conferences, events or sponsorships expenses.

To save time later, place researched information on marketing plans with links to the websites along with the estimated charges for the marketing budget. In the end, this chart becomes a visual representation of the company's networking effort as well as a means to track ROI.

All of this work and no one has so much as had one nibble of cheese or a glass of wine. ... No worries about which side to put the name tag (the right side), or how to walk up to a total stranger and get introduced.

Once all of the charts, plans and organizations have been identified, the next step after becoming a member is to join a committee as a volunteer and move up the ladder with the goal of reaching national board status. Joining committees is essential and mandatory because this approach requires a concentrated effort with two organizations and a focus on three key areas: programs, fundraising and finance. Offer to help acquire speakers for their conferences, call on peers and solicit donations for their fundraisers or help with the organization's financial planning. These committees offer enormous advantages. Finding speakers opens avenues to leaders

ordinarily out of reach without the full weight and legitimacy of the organization. Ask for cash for a good cause—same thing, with the added benefit of being seen as a humanitarian and a community-minded, hard-working, collaborative player. Usually principals of firms direct an organization's financial department and this committee offers the chance to prove business skills. When soft-spoken, responsible people hold volunteer leadership positions, they are often asked to become board members. Each step provides an entry card into a world that places an individual with high integrity in line to be recommended for work or offered projects outright.

Another advantage to joining committees is their size. They consist of small groups who take in only a few members each year, making it easy to get to know everyone and become welcomed quickly. For a shy person, relationship networking offers a lucrative opportunity to develop strong bonds with key leaders in an industry that has been targeted as a firm's market sector. And a final side benefit, surprisingly, comes when after working in close-knit groups over many years, the sea of people at ballroom events magically becomes a room full of hundreds of lifelong friends and business associates. Ultimately, these newly forged friendships transform frightening networking events into a welcoming environment and a place where it would the right time to turn and help a new member find their place in the community. 

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