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A Modern Girl's Guide to Networking

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Extract

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Introduction



IT IS A VERY RARE human being (spectacular or stupid) who wishes to make life harder for him or herself. Most of us wish to do what we can to be happy, successful, popular, rich and content with minimum effort and fuss. Yes, we put in extra time at the office to make our boss happy, or go to the gym when spring arrives and bikini weather is just around the corner, but generally we'd rather be sipping a cocktail on a sunlounger than slogging our guts out.

This is where networking comes in. The right kind of networking can make your life that little bit easier and your path on the road to riches and respect just that little bit smoother. Modern networking is a must-have combination of good manners, confidence and business know-how. You'll learn how to master these three skills in the forthcoming chapters … and once you have them, doors will start opening.

Friends and colleagues can never believe it now, but I used to be terribly shy. I was the kid at the back of the class who longed to put her hand up to answer a teacher's question but knew she'd stumble on the words so kept her mouth shut. I longed to join the choir but thought I wasn't

good enough. If someone said a handsome boy in my class liked me, I'd go bright red in the cheeks and studiously ignore him for the rest of the school term.

Every teenager goes through this awkward stage – how I cringe now, looking back – but you don't have to suffer from these insecurities for ever (not publicly, anyway).

Setting my heart on a career in journalism, I knew I'd have to educate myself and have more faith in my abilities. I started to choose friends who would instil confidence into me, I listened to bosses who would nurture me, and I observed those who had been successful while clinging on to the values that I admired: kindness, loyalty and a sense of fun. Luckily, I discovered lots of worthy role models.

I didn't change overnight, but gradually, slowly, I noticed I could attend a meeting and hold my own, or when introduced to a senior manager could talk sense. I could even give presentations in front of 50 or more people without blushing! I learned how to increase my confidence and communicate better – two major networking needs.

Now, people can't believe I was ever that quiet little girl, intimidated by classroom bullies or mean bosses – although inside I'm still the same, of course.

My favourite poem, one which I believe means a lot when thinking of networking, and how to handle different situations and different people, is entitled 'If', by Rudyard Kipling . To paraphrase, Kipling insists that if you can walk with kings but still get along with your own people and those less privileged than yourself then you will be a well-rounded individual. How true. A good networker feels as at home with an A-list celebrity as the waiter in her favourite restaurant. A good networker can talk to all, befriend everyone and minimise awkward silences with natural charm and an ability to make small talk.

So, here we go: in ten chapters you'll learn some invaluable tips, hear some interesting stories and understand how to increase your chances of success – both professionally and personally with *A Modern Girl's Guide to Networking*. Hey, who said you couldn't have it all … and more … without the 1980s shoulder pads?

Chapter One

Necessary networking for an easy life



IT'S IMPORTANT TO NOTE that this book is called *A Modern Girl's Guide to Networking*. This isn't the same kind of book that would have been written for our senior sisters in the 1960s, or even the 1980s, where there were still so many sexism battles to be won both in the workplace and in society. Of course, there are still great inequalities (men earn on average 30 per cent more than women doing an equivalent job, for example) and glass ceilings to smash, but at least women are in a place where they can fight. We've got through the door, now we just need to make ourselves at home.

What is networking?

Networking is the art of skilfully and subtly building contacts and making new friends. It's not about sending out a group email when you've lost your job and asking those people who you've been too busy to speak to for years to do you a favour. It's about making alliances and connections of mutual benefit. And networking isn't just about getting a move up the corporate ladder, it's also about long-term planning and knowing what's going on in the world in general.

When are you networking?

You are networking every time you leave the house. You don't have to be wearing a badge with your name on it, or furiously shaking hands with Japanese businessmen to be networking. However, it's too obvious if you just begin to talk to your successful brother-in-law after you've been

made redundant! In fact, you're networking (but without thinking about it) when you are:

- Chatting to people on Internet sites.
- Learning new skills at your local college or sports centre.
- Going away for the weekend with friends, and their friends.
- Volunteering in the local community.
- Throwing your child a birthday party and saying that other parents are welcome to come, too.
- Catching up with your neighbours.
- Attending a singles' event.
- Joining a club or society.
- Subscribing to educational or vocational courses.

If you're a mum, you're networking when you are chatting to other mothers at the school gates. If you're a secretary, you're networking when you are being polite to the post-room boy. If you're a doctor, you're networking when you share a drink with a journalist on holiday. The truth is we all network all day long (or we should be). In the simplest sense of the word, networking is no more than being sociable – both socially interested and interesting. Of course, it's how you manipulate this interaction that makes it valuable.

How can it improve your life?

For a start, networking improves your confidence: the more strangers you chat to and get on with, the better you will

feel about yourself and your ability to meet new people. Networking will also improve your social life: the wider your friendship circle, the more diverse and interesting events will fill up your calendar. And, of course, the biggest use for networking is to realise your career ambitions. It's an interesting US statistic that 80 per cent of job vacancies are never advertised, but filled through networking (be it through word of mouth, industry social events or the not-so-admirable nepotism!). Networking, by its most basic definition, means casting your net wide to all opportunities – and having the skills to make the most of them.

Does being a networker mean becoming a smarmy schmoozer?

There is a certain image of a successful networker being a rather overbearing lick-arse! Don't fulfil this stereotype. At all times think good manners and sociability, not fake charm and cupboard love. People see through it. There is a fantastic quote from a US Congressman called J.C. Watts that makes lots of sense when learning to become a better networker: 'Character is doing the right thing when nobody is looking.' What I believe he is saying is that it's easy to be full of fake smiles and fawning when you're trying to win a new contract or client, but it's your basic good character that will keep them with you and that wins true respect. The best networkers I know are the ones who aren't obviously at an event to slime up to people for money or contacts, but are there to listen, share, have fun and improve everyone's evening. They are the ones who go home with a wallet full of valuable business cards.

Deidre, 34

I attended a very glamorous business event recently and was warmly welcomed by a man there. He made a beeline for me as soon as I walked in, smiled, gave me a glass of champagne and asked me all about my work. It must have dawned on him slowly that I wasn't the Deirdre he thought I was – one that I suppose would be useful for his real estate business – and he began to look over my shoulder while I was talking, grunt replies rather than conversing, and at one point physically got up on his toes to see over the crowd for a more useful contact. It was his mistake. I may be a teacher, not a real estate guru, but my best friend is, and I advised her never to use this charmless man.

Top five tips on how to spot a smarmy schmoozer!

1. They'll ask you a question and ignore your answer – they're too busy looking over your shoulder to see if someone more 'useful' has walked in.
2. They laugh a little too hard at your jokes and smile a bit too widely … without joy ever reaching their eyes.
3. Their first question is: 'What do you do?'
4. Their second question is: 'Who do you know?'
5. They cruise away from you to a new person, and go through exactly the same dialogue!

Natural networkers

The women in my life never cease to amaze me: be they my grandma who is still the most glamorous jetsetter despite illness and bereavement, or my mother who raised us alone while working to support her home and educating herself at the same time, or my deputy at work who overcame the sudden loss of a parent with class and a professionalism I will always admire.

Women have a lot of natural networking skills – which makes my job in this book much easier – but sometimes we just need to be reminded of them. Us girls are nurturers, protectors, friends, style icons, great brains and great beauties. The fact that most of us aren't showing off our characteristics is a great sign of our healthy attitudes. We don't need to throw on a power suit and down shots of whisky with the boys to prove we're as valuable in the workplace – or golf club – as they are!

We're also natural gossips – yes, we love to pass on news (beneficial to others), and we make fabulous listeners (good for us!). So as long as our gossip is generally positive, then it's a good thing. Don't let your boyfriend tell you off for over-the-garden-fence chit-chat.

Basic rules for lovely living

The world would be a much nicer place if people used common sense and good manners. The more you use these, the more people will like and trust you – and that's half your networking education done! Here are some golden rules that should never be forgotten:

- A smile will cost you nothing.
- Treat others how you would like to be treated yourself.

- Mind your Ps and Qs.
- A firm handshake is a must – weak wrist equals weak impression.
- If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.
- Don't be rude to anyone on your way up … in case you pass them again on your way down!
- Sorry seems to be the hardest word – but it shouldn't be.
- Queuing won't kill you.

The ultimate must-haves for achieving social acceptability

Before you make the most of your natural networking skills, or you train yourself up to become an excellent networker, look at the basic rules of pleasant living. You can never pay too much attention to the following:

- Being hygienic, clean and fragrant.
- Being neatly turned out: stain-, crease- and tear-free.
- Being polite, punctual and alert.
- Being generous, fair and understanding.
- Being the best you can be – whatever that is!



Always be on your best behaviour

Because you never know where your next boss, best friend or boyfriend is going to come from, you should always try to behave well – and by that I mean try not to do or say anything you wouldn't want other people to hear or know about. We all muck up, but if you can sleep soundly in your bed at night knowing you tried your best, you'll be all right. And good manners and kindness go a long way … with the right kind of people!

Golden greetings

Networking isn't a difficult science. Sometimes its rules are as simple as greeting people correctly and bidding them farewell warmly. Yes, what goes on between the meet and greet and the au revoir is totally important … but you can never put too high a price on the correct ciao!

Hello

Shouldn't saying hello be the simplest thing in the world? If done correctly, yes. And saying hello to someone for the first time is when you will make that all-important first impression. So, smile and hold eye contact (for longer than three seconds, but less than ten) while making your spoken greeting or shaking a hand. If you are in a different country, make the effort and use their language to say hi. If you're with others, introduce them, too, so that they can exchange greetings. If you're waiting to be introduced, don't turn your back, yawn or walk off. This is the height of rudeness and will not do you any favours.

Goodbye

Don't do overly emotional cheerios unless your beloved is off to sail the high seas for three months. A simple handshake

or wave is a suitable au revoir for a new acquaintance or colleague. A quick hug or peck on the cheek will suffice for a friend. Please don't weep, drop to your knees and make them promise to see you again soon – or don't do the opposite. Never walk off mid-conversation, or leave the host of an event, without signing out correctly.

Kiss, kiss

One of the nightmares of modern society is who to kiss, when and how. The globe is shrinking with different cultures demanding a different 'pecking' order. If in doubt, put out your hand firmly in front of you, offering your palm for a quick shake. If your greeter pulls your forward for a kiss, at least by offering your right arm to his or her right arm, it will be clear which cheek you should go to first. If (cringe almighty!) the worst happens and you accidentally lip-lock, don't worry. We've all done it. Laugh it off, or ignore your misdemeanour if you sense your partner in crime would prefer it.

How many times should you kiss? I kiss friends and family once; colleagues, new acquaintances and luvvies get two; foreign dignitaries if they keep cheek swapping get three or four. Who's to stop them?

Sadly, when networking you will be forced to kiss more people than you wish to – but take comfort in the fact that this is not a full-on snog – in fact your lips should merely brush their cheek for a second. And never use tongues. Or hands.



NB Naughty words. Remember when networking, and in life in general, swearing can be considered offensive and terribly off-putting. Try to hold off on the cor blimeys until you know a person well and are assured they consider a few cheeky rude words funny or necessary rather than shocking. Never, ever swear in a job interview or when visiting future in-laws for the first time. And try to keep gesticulation to a minimum, too! You don't want to make the guest list for the top event in your industry, only to knock over the president's cocktail with your flamboyant gestures. Flipping the bird is never acceptable (unless you're a rather hard rapper who is purely reading this book as research for your next set of lyrics).

Does your accent affect your networking ability?

Although your accent shouldn't affect your networking ability, sadly, old-fashioned, misjudged stereotypes still pervade all societies! Of course, not all Americans are addicted to hamburgers, not all Italians are philanders and nor are all the Scots mean. Some people want to label the world … but it doesn't work. And even if you have an accent that is considered lower class or ugly, you can change people's perceptions.

If you choose a field in which you want to succeed, I truly believe that energy, enthusiasm and talent will win over your upbringing or social class.

When I decided (aged ten) to become a journalist, no one else in my respectable, working-class London East End family had ever been to university and I certainly didn't know any other journalists, so nepotism wasn't an option

for me. I got on the ladder with determination and self-belief and climbed it with hard work and good ideas. I didn't change my accent and I didn't hide my past, although I saw a few others around me trying to. Everything you experience, from your childhood to today, helps to make you who you are. Life is about learning lessons and lessons learned. If you're a good person, don't change – and certainly don't justify your past, your family, or your home.

'Different strokes for different folks' and all that – don't be embarrassed to be you!

If your accent is so strong that people can't understand you, and you're finding communication socially handicapping, perhaps you could have coaching in toning it down. I'm not talking about elocution lessons to put a plum in your mouth, just a speech therapist who can offer hints on slowing down and softening words to make you understandable.

Izzy, 24

I moved to London from Paris two years ago but still I encounter prejudice and ignorance about my accent. Some men find it sexy – but sometimes assume things about romancing me that aren't true. And a bigger negative is that if I ever clash with a colleague (I have an important job, meeting clients for an advertising agency) and we disagree over something, it is too easy for them to say 'No one understands you!' or 'You're foreign, you don't get it!' It is very dismissive and upsetting. Actually, what I offer is a more international approach and a fresh agenda ... and the intelligent people I work with (including my bosses, thank God!) get that.

How to remember people's names

Remembering others' names can be a nightmare, especially when you're being introduced to many people at the same time. The first trick is actually to *listen*! So often people are too busy smiling liking a goon or admiring the new acquaintance's Jimmy Choos that actually paying attention to what is being said is the last thing on their mind. Listen to the name and then repeat it. Yes, repeat it parrot-style immediately back at them. Now comes the time for a little mind trick: mentally try to link the name to something you will remember as soon as possible. Is it picturing a flower for a name like Rose, Hollie, Poppy, or something rather more sinister like your awful Great-Aunt Leslie who shares a name with your new friend? Use the name as much as you can straight away in the conversation; just saying it a few times will help it stick. And then, if at all possible, get their business card, or jot down their details in a diary.

Jacqui, 31

"At a very busy, bustling Christmas soirée last year, I misheard a name and spent the whole evening calling a lovely lady called Katie, Cacee. I even commented on what an unusual name she had – *and* introduced her to others. I don't think this was my networking faux pas though. I wish she had quietly corrected me ... before some drunken buffoon pointed out my mistake loudly in front of both of us as I was leaving."

Other people forget, too!

If you're standing in a group and you haven't been introduced to the others by the host or mutual friend, go ahead and introduce yourself. Your poor intermediary is probably squirming with embarrassment at having forgotten one of your names or job titles. We've all been there.

Secrets of Success

- Networking is not just an excuse to pull. Of course, if you find love while networking that's great, but networking is about more that just sharking members of the opposite sex.
- Don't enter a new business group and flirt outrageously (or actually date) more than one person in it. It will make you seem fickle and floozie-ish.
- Networking is not about scrounging for freebies. You shouldn't just be nice to the woman who owns a villa in St Lucia because she has a villa in St Lucia ... don't you think the poor woman can see through these Scrooge-antics by now?
- Gossiping is a natural part of networking – finding out what's going on in other companies or with your managerial rival is important for you. But remember this golden rule of gossip: don't say anything you would be embarrassed to say to the person's face. Gossip does have a nasty way of getting back to the person being talked about – and normally in a twisted, dramatised state!
- If you're not brave enough to go up to a group and say hello, then smile instead – this will instantly warm strangers to you and it's easy.

- If there is someone at an event that you really want to meet, make a beeline for a mutual acquaintance if you have one, or introduce yourself to a less nerve-wracking colleague of your desired goal and hope for an introduction. Or, if you're forced to do the worst, follow her to the powder room and just happen to be between her and the paper towels. Remember that classic episode of *Sex and the City* when Carrie befriended an infamously difficult maître d' by giving her a much-needed tampon? You could have such luck. This is only if it's someone of the same sex, obviously.

- Beware of your lipstick! Not only can it make you look like a bloody-toothed seventeenth-century wench if you get it on your teeth but it can also leave a mark when you greet someone. If they're left working a room with a big painted smacker on their cheek they won't be happy later when they finally get to a mirror. If you do leave a SWALK, apologise, point it out and offer to dab it off. Don't go straight in with a damp tissue.

- You can't be loved by everybody, every time. Some people just won't 'get' you – but this has more to do with them and their insecurities than you if you know you have been polite, kind and fair. Lose them from your life. They're not worth you (as a nice person) worrying or stressing about.

- Don't just see networking as a short-term charm offensive to get that pay rise or job offer. Networking can be incorporated into your everyday life, from when you're an enthusiastic trainee to a stay-at-home mum. Networking is the art of building alliances, making friends and making your life – and the lives of everyone else around you – that little bit easier.