

DEPARTURES

SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT UNTIL NEXT TIME

Cast Your Net

We've all been thrown into situations where we'd rather swallow glass than actually force ourselves to network, but there are also those rare, golden opportunities for building new relationships. Are you one of the guilty ones who doesn't milk these opportunities for all they're worth? Worse yet, do you fall into a comfort zone and fail to network at all?

During a recent MPI chapter monthly meeting, I offered to introduce a new college graduate to the networking circles before lunch. With ferocious determination, I set off on my mission with "Alexa" in tow, promising her instant friendships, fabulous new connections and several high-paying job offers before her last bite of dessert. We arrived early and got straight to the business of networking.

Target No. 1: A familiar face in the corner of the room; we'll call him "Hugo." Hugo is engrossed in a one-on-one conversation with someone else, so I make a mental note to revisit him in a few minutes.

Target No. 2: A group of women—all prominent industry veterans—standing in a tight circle and chatting. Not an inch of daylight can penetrate their intimidating perimeter. Another mental note: check back later.

Return to Target No. 1: Hugo is still talking with the same person, and now has his back to the room. We move in. (I think Alexa is mortified by my boldness.) We stand a few feet away for several awkward minutes, looking at them with raised eyebrows of hopeful anticipation. We're feeling not entirely unlike autograph seekers. They continue their conversation, oblivious to us. Ugh.

Return to Target No. 2: We stand outside the women's military-strength perimeter, hoping for someone to break the circle and invite us in. They stand strong. We fail.

A-ha! Finally we see a friendly, welcoming face! Perfunctory handshakes take place. I explain that this is Alexa's first official MPI meet-

ing and that she is looking to break into the industry. Our new contact graciously gives Alexa her card and offers to connect her with an industry colleague who is looking to hire. Hooray! The woman moves on after a few minutes, wishing Alexa well in her job search.

Give Target No. 1 a final try: No good. Now he has officially spent the entire networking period conversing with the same person. What a waste for him, and possibly a golden opportunity lost for Alexa.

I realize from this very deliberate attempt at networking that it's a struggle for all of us to step outside of our comfort zones, and we're all guilty of it from time to time. We know the benefits of networking, so why, then, do we avoid it? Because it's often easier to fall into usual patterns and reconnect only with familiar faces.

I'm sure somewhere out there at this very moment, Hugo is standing with his back to a crowd, monopolizing someone's conversation and missing the big picture. Alexa missed a great opportunity to meet you, and you may have missed out on your next star meeting planner.

To the circle of veterans, I ask that you please open your circle. It's great that you're able to reconnect with each other every month, but you never know whom you may be keeping out.

The person standing alone and terrified could be your next huge account, and reaching out to him or her may mean the difference between this being the person's first MPI meeting... or last.

If you're that terrified newcomer, my best advice is to act like you own the place. Be bold, friendly and relish the opportunity at hand—you'll realize we're nothing to be afraid of. Really.

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