

How do I approach someone at a meeting that I don't know but would really like to meet or include in my professional network?

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Well, now this is a problem. Dr. Important is right over there; I would love to meet her and ask for her professional advice. But I don't know her – what if she bites? What if she laughs at my question/request? What if she thinks I'm an idiot?

To quote Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers ... *relax*. I have seldom (OK, never) been bitten or laughed at derisively by someone whom I have approached at a meeting, and if they thought I was an idiot, they were kind enough to keep it to themselves.

I am a relatively shy person by nature, at least until I get to know someone. I have at times, earlier in my career, been reticent to approach people whom I wanted to meet and include in my professional network and have occasionally passed up an opportunity to do so. Afterward, I have always asked myself – what was I afraid of? What is the worst thing that could have happened?

Professional meetings are important for a variety of reasons, including acquiring knowledge, developing presentation skills, contributing service, and many others. One of the most important aspects of attending professional meetings is networking with your colleagues. This includes not only networking with colleagues who are currently in your professional network, but also expanding your professional network by meeting new people.

At meetings, there are numerous opportunities to meet new people and expand your network. These include the opening reception, other receptions associated with the meeting, educational sessions, committee meetings, PRN meetings, poster sessions, and numerous others.

So – how to approach someone at a meeting? If you know someone who knows the person whom you wish to meet, you can ask them to introduce you. But if that's not the case, take the bull by the horns and introduce yourself. Don't interrupt the individual while they are in conversation with someone else – wait for an opportunity to approach them after they are finished with their current conversation. Be polite and friendly. Say something like, "Dr. XX, my name is _____," and tell them who you are. Don't apologize – there's no need to say something like "I'm sorry to bother you, but" You don't need to apologize for wanting to meet someone. If you can indicate that you are familiar with their work in teaching, scholarship, and/or professional service, then do so, but don't flatter them excessively. Maintain good eye contact, smile, and stay calm and relaxed. Be sure to listen as the other person talks, and don't interrupt them – wait for them to finish before you initiate your response.

Certain situations may create natural opportunities to approach people. If the individual whom you want to meet is presenting a poster at the meeting, then you can attend the poster presentation and approach the presenter with a question/comment. Similarly, if the individual whom you wish to meet is delivering an oral presentation at the meeting, then there is usually

an opportunity to approach them after they have completed their presentation, before they move on to their next session.

If you wish to approach someone during a social reception during the meeting, be mindful not to overconsume alcohol – you will not make a good impression if you introduce yourself to someone after one too many appetizers. Don't hover too closely to the individual, and don't follow them around. Be professional, respectful, and appropriate (I suggest that you resist the urge to knock on the door of their bathroom stall). Maintain a respectful distance, and don't invade the individual's personal space. Don't monopolize the person's time, particularly if there are other people waiting to talk with them.

Carry business cards with you, and hand the individual your business card to help them remember you and to provide them with your contact information. When you return home from the meeting, e-mail the individual to reiterate that you enjoyed meeting them and thank them for taking the time to speak with you.

Professional meetings are rife with opportunities to meet new people and expand your network. Take full advantage of these opportunities, and don't be reticent to approach others and introduce yourself. What's the worst that can happen?

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