

4 Low-Risk Strategies for Expanding Your Network

By Tamara Paton (on Quiet Revolution: www.quietrev.com)

Many of our professional paths lead us to landmarks discovered by knowing someone who knows someone.

One might assume that extroverts have a natural advantage in this regard. After all, the outgoing thrive in a sea of people sipping cocktails and exchanging business cards. But can a wallflower compete from the sidelines?

I considered this question recently while observing a CEO address his company's annual meeting. He opened his remarks with the admission that he dreaded large groups like the one seated before him. His aversion to meeting new people was so strong that he once hoped his new iPhone's Find Friends app might eliminate the need for nervous introductions.

Ultimately, the app sparked an idea for a location-based service that represents the organization's most significant technical innovation in years. And it's worth noting that the CEO is beloved by countless colleagues, largely because he doesn't let his introversion stand in his way. In fact, his willingness to admit vulnerability makes others feel at ease.

Despite first appearances, I believe this CEO and other introverts can enjoy long-term success in the networking game. As we build our networks, introverts and extroverts alike can experiment with four strategies to strengthen our social context:

1. Be someone's hero

HR leader Jennifer Bouyoukos is a networking marvel. A self-described introvert, Jennifer invests in relationships by finding ways to serve and support others. When Jennifer attends a large social event, she looks for someone who appears to be there alone. "Anyone standing on the fringe looking for someone to talk to needs my help," she believes. "If I engage them in a quiet conversation, they are going to be grateful. And their gratitude puts me at ease."

Introversion expert Lisa Petrilli uses social media to let people know that they have a fan. "Reach out via LinkedIn, Twitter, and even Facebook to people who will be attending conferences...Let them know you're looking forward to meeting them."

Who doesn't appreciate having an admirer, especially one whom she hasn't yet met?

2. Optimize your environment

Author Dorie Clark prefers "minimally stimulating environments" over swanky parties and cocktail receptions. Instead, she hosts dinner parties for interest groups of new contacts, from female journalists to business authors and fellow attendees of a conference.

When we must attend a large event, we often have some control over key variables. For example, if my introverted husband must go, he goes early. The smaller, quiet crowd appears less intimidating, much more approachable than a mosh pit of tipsy loud talkers. During an event's first half hour, people's friends haven't yet arrived, so they are more willing to chat with someone they don't know.

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