

“Standing Out” in Your Networking Conversations:

Practical Ways to Separate Yourself from the Rest of the Crowd

#1 Be Authentic

It can be tempting to consciously mold oneself to fit the expectations of others. However, when you read about branding—whether it is the branding of a major consumer product or the branding of self—the path to success emphasize authenticity. Be yourself. From an individual perspective, this means there is a clear alignment between what you say and how you behave. If you are “not yourself,” then there is the risk of the other person thinking “something is not right here”—an inconsistency. As David McNally & Karl Speak observe in their 2002 book, *Be Your Own Brand: A Breakthrough Formula for Standing Out from the Crowd*: “Consistency is the hallmark of all strong brands. Inconsistency weakens brands and suspends belief.” Being authentic increases the likelihood of being consistent.

#2 Creatively Design Your Business Card

In a networking situation, you are expected to have a business card. It is a minimum requirement. It is the most common networking tool for another person to quickly have your contact information. Since everyone is expected to have a business card, on the surface, it does not look like a way to stand out. However, there are some amazingly creative ways individuals are designing business cards. I recommend a Google Search using the term “creative business cards.” You will get articles and examples with such titles as:

- “Cool Business Card Designs”
- “100 (Really) Creative Business Card”
- “30 Memorable Business Cards”

Think of redesigning your business card so it better captures the attention—and imagination—of new networking contacts.

#3 Be a Connector

You meet a new person at a networking event. You determine it would be worthwhile to build a relationship. How could you help this person in order to show your value? One of the very best ways is to connect them to someone they would benefit from meeting.

#4 Express Your Energy and Enthusiasm

If you are not genuinely enthused about yourself and the things you are interested in, how do you expect others to be? In Malcolm Gladwell's bestselling book, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (2000), he describes how emotions are contagious. He even calls it “emotional contagion.” Well, you want your story to be emotional contagious. Expressing your enthusiasm about the topics you talk about will increase the likelihood the new network contact you are speaking to will be caught up and energized.

#5 Be First

One of the easiest ways to differentiate yourself is being first. It is a fact—just make sure it is verifiable. It says something about you, especially if you want to convey the trait of being innovative, competitive, successful, or insightful. What are the “firsts” in your career and life?

- “I graduated top of my class.”
- “I was the first to win the coveted _____ Award.”
- “I was product manager for the first commercially-viable nanotechnology consumer product in the United States.”
- “I won a gold medal in the 1996 Olympics.”
- “I started the first social networking group for IT professionals.”

#6 Follow up

Businesses participate in trade shows at great expense. Their goal is to generate leads. Amazingly, the statistics show that “less than 20% of sales leads ever get followed-up.” It seems individuals who network suffer from the same problem. Diane Darling, author of *The Networking Survival Guide: Get the Success You Want by Tapping into the People You Know* (2003), makes the following observation: “Few people follow up at all and even fewer know *how* to follow up.” When you follow up, you dramatically increase your chances of being remembered by your new network contact.

#7 Don't Go Empty Handed

Identify something you can give to another that will add value in some way. Your goal is to build social capital and encourage reciprocity with an individual networking contact with whom you hope to deepen your relationship. You also want the “give-away” to be a relevant demonstration of your competence—or, at least, some part of how you are competent. As a result, influential networking contacts will have their own story to tell about the benefits you can deliver. Some examples of a value-add “give-away”:

- **DEMONSTRATION:** Offer a mini-problem solving session.
- **DIAGNOSTIC:** Suggest the contact complete a diagnostic you've created based on your knowledge and experience. You will analyze the results and give feedback.
- **DIALOGUE:** Offer to share knowledge you've generated that ties to their interests (e.g., lessons learned, trends analysis, synthesis of some body of knowledge).
- **DIAGRAM** a process: Offer to share an illustration of a process that links to their interests or the problems they face.
- **DESIGN** an experience: Create an engaging experience that enables the person to see your strengths in action.

#8 Make Your Elevator Pitch More Memorable

Like a business card or a resume, everyone is expected to have an elevator pitch. However, with everyone having one, it really makes it hard to stand out and be memorable. In an article in the “Managing Your Career” column in the *Wall Street Journal* (11/4/2008: “Networking? Here's How to Stand Out”), Joann Lublin shares the following story:

An offbeat but memorable “elevator pitch” will also make you stand out in a crowd, says Lorraine Howell, a public-speaking trainer in Seattle. Several years ago, Ms. Howell coached Wimsey Cherrington, a Seattle massage therapist who unearths hidden causes of chronic pain. The therapist was having trouble describing her specialty during

gatherings of a women business owners' group. “Networking wasn't working at all,” Ms. Cherrington remembers. Things changed after the therapist began calling herself “a body detective.” The catchy description “at least doubled my practice,” Ms. Cherrington says.

#9 Pay Attention to Others

This sounds so “ho hum.” However, what is important is not the guideline but the execution. The guideline is easy, the execution is more difficult. For example, leaders are advised to give feedback, but many do it poorly. Why? Because good feedback is not “Joe, you did a great job.” It's more like, “Joe, I noticed when you did this with the client, he really calmed down and that changed the entire climate of the meeting. Great job!” Well, you have to notice the details about what another person does and then build your comments and insights upon details relevant to them. In turn, your feedback will be more memorable because it will be clear you were actually paying attention.

#10 Use Inquiry Skills

You are familiar with the common networking advice of “listen more than you speak.” To go even further, learn to use inquiry skills such as insightful questioning. With this approach, you seek opportunities to extend the individual's thinking so that they realize you are not only know how to have a conversation, but you are a valuable “thinking partner” who can help them see new possibilities. For example, questions to extend the thinking of others are:

- “What are the implications of what you describe for...”
- “I've noticed an emerging trend that's getting a lot of attention in the press is _____. How does what you are describing relate to that?”
- “I'm familiar with _____ and I sense a connection to what you are talking about. How are these concepts similar or different?”