
'Plane' Speaking: In-Flight Networking

By Olivia Fox Cabane

"I don't have time to network." "There's no way I can spend time at all the events people tell me I should go to." Does this ring true for you? If so, consider this: Networking doesn't just happen when you take time out of your busy schedule to appear at an official "networking" event. In fact, networking can happen anytime, anywhere. Every minute you're around other human beings is a chance to network. Self-made billionaires are known for their tendency to network everywhere and all the time — on the golf course, but also at the doctor's office, at the health club, or on a plane.

Now, I'm far from being a billionaire, but planes have always been one of my favorite places to network. Admittedly, chances of success increase when you're in business or first class, but you never know. Quite a few business moguls make it a point of honor to travel coach, and many companies have policies that require their executives to fly coach on short distances. Some flights simply have no assigned seating, which was the case on the Delta Shuttle I took from New York to Boston a few months ago.

As I boarded that flight, I let my eyes scan over the seated passengers. On these flights, I often board last, so as to have the most choice in seating companions. I selected my flight neighbor: Wearing a suit (presumably a business person), sitting alone (easier to approach), and reading a book (as opposed to huddling over a laptop or report). After a few tries, the conversation took off. As it turned out, the gentleman was a Managing Director from one of my target companies. A few follow-up e-mails later, we had lunch. Over the following weeks, I introduced him to a few contacts of mine who could help him expand his network. Three months later, he arranged a private lunch for me with his company's national

manager, whose division happened to need my services.

STARTING POINT

So, where can you start? Whether you're sitting on a plane, riding in an elevator, or waiting in a hotel lobby, you already have quite a bit in common with people around you. After all, you're in the same environment and going through similar travel experiences, which gives the two of you plenty to talk about. Starting a conversation is as easy as offering a comment about this common environment followed by a related, open-ended question. Why open-ended? The problem of closed questions (answerable by yes or no) is that once you've been given a response, you're back where you started — and you'll have to think of another one to keep conversation going. If you begin your conversation by commenting on your immediate experience or surroundings, it's easy to then expand to the next level. For instance, while waiting for a plane with other passengers, you can comment on the airline's service, and inquire of your neighbors' final destination. From there on, it's easy to expand the conversation to the purpose of their trip, and then to the scope of their business. Another good conversation starter is to notice something about your target and offer a compliment followed by an open-ended question, such as "where did you get it?" or "what does it mean?" Without saying so, you're sending out the very flattering signal that they seem interesting to you, and that you'd like to get to know them.

For best results, make sure to listen far more than you talk; the longer you keep them talking, the more captivating they'll find you, so strive to keep the spotlight on them during the conversation. And while you listen, take note of any difficulties they mention, or any issues they're facing, about which you may know something. Recommend resources or books, offer to introduce your conversation partner to someone you know, or (at a conference) to someone in the room you think they

should meet. Aim to provide as much value as you can, and use the back of your business card to write this information — this ensures that your card will be kept and treasured.

You can never predict how it's going to happen, but it's likely that after a few questions, you'll find common ground; almost any two people can find a shared interest or experience. This is a great base for building a new networking relationship, because people are comfortable when they are surrounded by like-minded souls. Shared beliefs, appearances, tastes and circumstances all contribute to rapport.

LET YOUR BODY TALK

Another way to establish rapport is by synchronizing your body language with theirs. When people like each other, they unconsciously start to behave in a similar manner, synchronizing their actions. Rapport by design is established by deliberately altering your behavior in order to become like the other person. Their reaction to you will be: "I don't know what it is, but there's something about this person that I really like." You can either mirror or match their body language: If they move their left hand, you move your left hand; or if they move their left, you move your right. You can synchronize posture or particular gestures such as head tilts and nods, facial expressions, and breathing. You can also synchronize rhythms: If she taps her foot, you tap your pencil; if she nods her head, you pat your arm. One of the most important things to synchronize is your voice — its tone, volume, speed and pitch. People won't notice that you're copying unless it's truly obvious, because most people are focused on themselves and on the conversation, much less on you.

Another important body language tip is to keep your eyes on the person you're talking to throughout the conversation. Profound eye contact signals trust, knowledge and intelligence. It also makes people feel they have captivated you. Two more tips to ensure rapport: First, dress up

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(I kid you not — research has found that the more elegantly dressed the person was, the safer people felt around them). Second, have a book, magazine or laptop in plain sight — it shows you have something else to do and won't necessarily bore them. And if they turn out to be boring, you will have something else to do.

Aside from these all-purpose tools, there are specific tools for specific environments. On a plane, for instance, you will need to greet your fellow passenger upon first sight — an unwritten (and pretty funny, if you ask me) code makes conversation quite awkward if you haven't

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acknowledged each other's presence from the outset. During the flight, the easiest time to initiate conversation is during mealtime — you're going through a common experience together and have something easy to talk about.

At a conference, you also want to initiate contact when you first sit down. It's the easiest time to do so since people often expect you to say "Hi." After that, the best time to start chatting is during breaks. If you're going to get a coffee, you could ask if they want one too and ask them to watch over your stuff while you go get it. This creates instant bonding because you're trusting them with your possessions. Then, when you return, it's easy to thank them and start the conversation with open-ended questions, as we've seen above.

Now, if you really wanted to maximize your networking impact, you could contact a speaker, an expert, a

board member or anyone else you want to get to know before the conference and invite them to lunch. Before a key program, you could introduce yourself to speakers or panelists, welcome them and let them know why you chose their session. They're often eager for more information from their audience. During the program, find a helpful question to ask. This will make you think actively rather than just sitting passively, and you'll be remembered because you have been seen. Don't forget to introduce yourself; your visibility will make it easier for people to come up to you after the session and start a conversation. You can be networking at any point during the conference: during meals, in elevators, in sign-in lines. Fantastic contacts can be made everywhere — women are known to make lifelong friends in the ladies' room!

