

Make the Most of Your Networking Meetings

You needn't treat networking lunch meeting like a formal job interview. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't take a few steps to make sure it goes off without a hitch.

Schedule smartly: To avoid playing phone tag and rescheduling, you should suggest a good time and place to meet. You know your schedule; offer a few options that work for you. Be flexible, but don't say you're available anytime. You don't want to convey the impression that your time is so disposable that you can be put off for months, or that an appointment can be rescheduled ad infinitum. When it comes to selecting a location, we've provided some pointers to help you find appropriate venues.

Where to meet: Good places to meet include...

The office: If your contact suggests meeting there, it's a great place to meet. Alternately, you can offer that you could come by the office for convenience's sake. You'll get to see where the person spends their time, and you may get the chance to meet colleagues, which could help to grow your network.

A café: Selecting a café indicates that this will be a casual encounter and gives you both the option of either cutting it short if you're in a hurry or lingering over your coffee if things go well. Ask your contact to suggest a favorite café, or suggest one yourself that's conveniently located near your contact's workplace.

A restaurant with a good lunch menu and reliable service: Waiting often brings out the worst in people— particularly hungry people. Pick a place where you know you can get seated quickly, served promptly, and get the check before the conversation stalls. Be sure this restaurant is conveniently located for your contact and avoid messy meals like spaghetti.

Common ground: If you know you're both headed to brunch at a mutual friend's home, a local art opening, or a film festival fundraiser, you could plan to meet there—or better yet, offer your contact a lift to the event as an added incentive to attend. If you share an interest with your contact—a particular author, say—you might suggest attending a reading by that author and going out for coffee afterward. Meeting on common ground makes it easy to converse and find points of connection.

Where to meet: On the other hand, bad ideas for initial meetings include...

A bar: Unless your contact suggests it or is someone you know well, you don't want to give the impression that you're a heavy drinker or that this is a date.

A steakhouse or burger joint: Avoid such an eatery unless you've already ascertained that your dining partner likes nothing better than a juicy hunk of meat.

An ultra-swanky restaurant: Lavish wining and dining can give the impression that you're trying too hard and make your contact suspicious of your motives. It can be a distraction, too: You want your dining partner to remember you, not the five-star menu. Formal settings can also make many people self-conscious. You don't want your dining partner fretting over which utensil to use when you're trying to put that person at ease.

Your place: Even if your offer to come up and see your etchings is innocent, it might not appear that way. Nothing makes a situation more awkward than the perception of unwanted advances, on either your end or your contact's.

Reminders: Send a brief, gentle reminder email the day before your meeting to confirm that it's still on. If you don't have an email address, call the receptionist at your contact's workplace and ask to be transferred to the person's voicemail so you can leave a message without interrupting his or her day.

Try an email or voicemail message along these lines: “Hi, [contact’s first name]. This is [your first and last name]. I just wanted to say I’m looking forward to meeting you in person tomorrow. If anything comes up, please let me know by calling my cell at [number]. Otherwise, I’ll see you at [venue] at [time].”

Prepare for your meeting: Take it easy! There’s no need to spend hours preparing for lunch or coffee as you would for a formal interview, where you’d be interrogated about your credentials and intentions. That said, a few minor preparations might put your mind at ease so you can better relax, be yourself, and enjoy the food and the company.

The week before: Get geared up. Ensure that your résumé is updated (in the event your contact asks for a copy), your work samples are in order, and you have a business card to hand over. If your favorite business casual outfit needs dry cleaning, take care of it now. If you’re profoundly dissatisfied with your wardrobe options, go out and buy one new item that will give you extra confidence. But there’s no need to spend lavishly on a whole new outfit—it’s only lunch!

The day before: Get everything in order. Email or call your contact with your reminder. Make sure you have enough cash to cover lunch for two, in case credit cards aren’t accepted or the machine is down. Lay out your clothes, ensuring your shoes are shined and your garments are spotless and wrinkle-free. Set out any accessories you plan to wear, too; you don’t want to tear through your drawers at the last minute looking for a belt. Pack your bag or briefcase, including your wallet, keys, and business cards, plus a notebook, a couple of pens, a comb, and Band-Aids in case your good shoes give you blisters. It couldn’t hurt to bring along a fresh copy of your résumé (remember, though, to hand it over only if you’re asked for it). You also might want to bring a couple of work samples just in case. Then go to bed early to get a full night’s sleep— nothing less than eight hours will do!

The day of: Treat yourself to a leisurely breakfast. Get to work early in case lunch runs long. Take it easy with work—try to avoid anything that will raise your stress level. Then arrive at your venue ten minutes early and wait patiently for your contact to arrive. Don’t call your contact to confirm arrival until he or she is at least 15 minutes late. Express understanding when offered apologies—being gracious about tardiness will help put you in your contact’s good graces. Then, have a good time—and be sure you pick up the check!

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