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NETWORKING AT THE HOLIDAYS

Creating Meaningful Moments

It's that time of the year again – stacks of invitations are coming in for holiday parties and events. You look at the pile on your desk, and wonder how you'll find the time. After all, you also need to schedule a few hours to stand in absurdly long lines at the mall and to spend "quality time" with family and friends. Your first reaction may be to say "No," to invitations. Can it possibly be worth it to rally at the end of a long day to attend a holiday business party?

Well I know most friends and many magazine articles advise you to simplify your life, say no, and reduce stress. I hate stress too. And you can only do so many things in one month. Yet, if you think about it; set aside your frenzied feelings for just a minute, you'll recall that each year at this time you've probably gone to an event where you have truly connected with people and had fun.

During the holidays people are feeling upbeat, the atmosphere is festive. The business year is coming to a close, and people are looking forward to having time to relax. If your schedule is typical of most people's today, you're so busy that you've put people off for lunch or coffee for months. Keep it up and you don't see some people for years at a time.

So, while it's tempting to check no on those RSVPs, it is possible to be strategic, pick a few events and make the most of them. While you're filling up your cup of eggnog at a holiday gathering, take a look around the room. Who's there that you don't normally see? Walk over and start up a conversation – you could in that moment start a lasting relationship that leads to opportunities you never imagined.

If you're attending a party where you don't know many people, consider it an advantage. Since the mood is festive, people are more receptive if you walk up and say hello. They are more likely to bring you into their circle of friends or introduce you to others. Conversation tends to be about fun stuff, and the things we really care about. That makes it more memorable.

A lot of people hate small talk. You don't have to make it small. Ask a few questions until you hit on common ground and make it interesting. Take that conversation for a ride. Why is it important


to do this? Because – small talk leads to big talk. Those conversations about nothing can lead to something wonderful.

Here are some tips on how to get the conversation going. (Excerpts from *The Executive Guide to Networking and Building Relationships* – due out in early 2006):

- **Initiate the conversation.** Make it easy by jumping in with the first question or comment – people appreciate it. There is nothing more awkward than the first few moments of a conversation. Someone who can take charge and move it forward is regarded as a great conversationalist.
- **Perfect the art of asking questions.** Eventually you will hit on some common ground – travel, restaurants, weekend activities, sporting events, schools attended, children and family, schools, elderly parents. All of these are topics that lead naturally to business conversation – the age of children leads to conversation about private school, college, and grandchildren. Travel leads to free time, work schedule, retirement, and goals for retirement, vacation homes and future plans.
- **Watch people and really listen, with your eyes as well as your ears.** Read between the lines to truly “hear” what a person is saying. Imagine you are the only two people in the room while they are talking and make it a mission to really “get” who they are.
- **Be genuinely curious.** When you are genuinely interested, you can learn all kinds of interesting things about clients and prospects that will help you make stronger connections. Don’t be afraid to ask if they are retired or just thinking about it – what they would do if they did retire, and how they have arrived at this point in their lives. Everyone has a story to tell, and if you seem interested, it takes little prompting to get him or her to talk.
- **Make conversation two-way.** Don’t make it an inquisition. Bring your own relevant life experiences in, or – if it’s a stretch – the experiences of other people you know who have something in common.
- **If the conversation stops:** Return to them, and ask them another question.

You never know where you’re going to find new opportunities. In fact, a colleague recently told a story about a family party she attended. She arrived thinking it would be like any other family party – updating aunts and uncles on the kids’ achievements, catching up with cousins she only saw once a year.

She ended up chatting with the new spouse of a cousin she hadn’t seen in a few years – turns out he had recently moved to a management position at a large company. When she told him what her business was – he said his colleague in another department had been thinking about



calling someone to do exactly that kind of work. He passed along her name, and a month later, they signed a contract.

Just because the year is coming to an end doesn't mean you have to wait until January to make new business relationships. As the song goes – it's the most wonderful time of the year. Finding new prospective clients and making promising business relationships is a surefire way to make the end of the year even more wonderful!