

business issues

REACH OUT VIA IDEAS

BY ANNE SCARLETT

Ideas-driven networking puts you in touch
with the right people.

AN INTERACTIVE BREAKOUT SESSION during a conference (like NASCC: The Steel Conference). Lunch and socializing before a panel discussion. A celebratory event held at a prospective client's office. An elevator. The valet queue. Wherever. As we know so well, networking opportunities are ubiquitous.

As business development professionals, we've had our share of networking successes and disappointments. We have crafted our own process for working the room; give rather than receive, focus on connecting others and organize our follow-up approaches.

We have created expectations—of ourselves and of our internal colleagues—for what constitutes a successful networking exchange. For some of us it's a numbers game; for others it's about making just one new quality contact.

New technology has come along, our careers have advanced and our networking prowess has improved.

One new innovative format I discovered recently during Chicago Ideas Week is called ideas-driven networking. While a level of pre-work and (supposedly simple) technological algorithms certainly play a role, there is something we can all borrow from this concept, particularly if we host networking functions.

How Ideas-Driven Networking Works

Friendzy, a Chicago-based startup founded by Greg Becker and Alex Goldman, asked event attendees to complete a very brief questionnaire. It queried: Who are you? What do you already know (and offer)? What do you want to know (and receive)?

Based upon the candid answers of the attendees—along with some sleuthing on LinkedIn and other Internet sources—the Friendzy team carefully selected five people with whom each individual needed to meet at the event.

Sixty people attended the event. Upon arrival, each attendee received a sheet of paper with directions, along with a list of their five “targets.” To elevate the quality of the exchange, Friendzy provided customized conversation starters for each individual to ask one another.

Some were thoughtful: “Co-working spaces are popping up all over the U.S. What do you think this says about people

and our need for community? What type of co-working spaces would you open?”

Some were techy: “Computers started with mainframes and terminals. The personal computer revolution distributed computing power. With the rise of the cloud, we're moving back to a mainframe model. How will this impact the future of computing?”

Others covered social issues: “Silicon Valley and the tech community have amongst the worst diversity rates in the country. How can we fix this?”

Then there were the imaginative: “You have three months and \$30,000 to spend. Where do you travel, and what would you like to do there?”

And the personal: “What was the first R-rated movie you saw?”

They spanned the gamut, and no two questions were the same.

Once attendees had located and spoken with all of the people on their original list, they were encouraged to gather at various tables focused upon big categories, such as healthcare, technology, environment, education, entrepreneurship and art. On these tables were tiny slips of paper with even more thought-provoking questions revolving around those topics.

This second step reminded me of Open Space Technology, a networking format originally used by the tech industry. It's one that others (including myself) have modified and used in workshops and meetings. The similarities? Both formats have no firm agenda. Both require people to self-organize, take initiative, remain expressive and inquisitive and provide

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a respectful, safe environment. As well, both formats result in valid action steps, new ideas and invigorated attendees.

The difference? Open Space Technology invites attendees to proactively move from one topic to another, hopefully finding one that piques their interest, and then moving on once they have contributed to full capacity. Conversely, the ideas-driven event had already collected abundant pre-information about each attendee, making the topic table questions less random and more germane to the skill sets, backgrounds and interests of people in the room.

Observations and Results

As an Ideas Week volunteer, I participated in the setup and then observed the event's progression. I noted that there were no wallflowers, no uncomfortable body language and no anxiety-ridden faces.

Could it be attributed to the type of person this event attracted? Perhaps. But I'd like to think that their ease was also strongly enhanced by all of the effort that went into having them meet just the right people—those they could help and those they could learn from. My guess is that no one felt like they were missing opportunities to meet a future client because

they had a mission to meet people who were hand-selected as mutually beneficial.

As a result, it's a safe bet that the attendees walked away feeling satisfied, even inspired. I'm hopeful that their new connections will result in fruitful, long-lasting relationships.

What You Can Do

In service provider industries such as architecture and engineering, we're always looking for innovative ways to bring value to our clients and prospective clients. New ideas for touch points are highly sought after.

If you host events to bring clients and prospects together, such as a golf outing, an event at an industry conference, a breakout session at a conference or a holiday party, you could use some of the ideas-driven strategies to take those events to the next level. Think about how you might adjust your networking environment so attendees feel satisfied, electrified and gratified.

I'd love to hear what you are doing, or what you plan to do in the future, to further boost the networking experience among your network. ■