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The Difference Between Networking and Making Friends



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On the surface, networking and making friends look pretty similar. You're meeting new people, finding common interests, and hoping that the relationship will continue.

But the truth is, they're different—and it's important to distinguish between the two. As former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright recently put it, “women are really good at making friends and not good at networking.”



Networking is about building rapport, having substantive conversations, and finding commonalities with other professionals in a limited amount of time. Yes, it's an opportunity to connect with others—but it's more about advancing your professional goals than it is about getting people to like you or boosting your social scene.

If you're trying to make friends at every networking event you attend, you may be doing yourself a disservice. Here's a look at some common networking scenarios that can veer toward friend territory, and how to make sure you're approaching them the right way.

The Situation: As you're grabbing a glass of wine at the bar, you strike up a conversation with the woman next to you. With drink in hand, you're ready to

move on and [work the room](#), but your new Pinot pal seems determined not to leave your side.

Making Friends: Feeling bad, you grab a table and chat with her throughout the event. Hey, she's really nice, and it's tough not knowing anyone in these types of situations.

Networking Effectively: After a few minutes of chatting, you invite her to be your "networking buddy." You'll divide and conquer—each of you talking to new people throughout the evening, and agreeing to introduce each other when there's someone the other should meet.

The Situation: Five minutes after introducing yourself and asking, "So, what do you do?" you find yourself still listening to someone tell you about the projects she's working on.

Making Friends: You don't want to hurt her feelings by interrupting, and her job is pretty interesting, so you smile, nod, and listen while she chatters on—never stopping to ask what you do.

Networking Effectively: Realizing she's not going to reciprocate and turn the attention onto you, you listen for the next sentence where you can relate what she's saying to a project you're working on, a client you have, or any topic you can speak to and jump in. By doing so, you've created a seamless transition, and you can start sharing some things of your own.

The Situation: You see someone standing alone, carrying the handbag you've been eyeing for months. It's [the perfect icebreaker](#), so you head over to chat.

Making Friends: You compliment her on her bag, then launch into a conversation, bonding over your love of Burberry and [sample sales](#).

Networking Effectively: You break the ice by mentioning her bag—after all, making small talk is one of the quickest and most effective ways to build rapport. But after a few minutes, you tactfully find a way to transition to business talk, changing the conversation into an exchange of why you're at the event or what you do.

The Situation: You're having a great conversation with someone about [the conference you both attended](#) last month. Just as you're about to ask if she'd like to have lunch next week, someone else pushes her way into the conversation.

Making Friends: You don't want to seem annoyed or interrupt, so you stand there awkwardly, not sure how to react and never adding to the conversation.

Networking Effectively: You realize you're not going to be introduced, so you interject yourself into the conversation. You smile, introduce yourself, and maybe even stay a bit—after all, this new person could be a new contact, too. Then, you slip your colleague your card, saying, "I'll let you two chat, but I'd love to have lunch sometime. Email me next week?"

So, does not all this mean that all the fun has to be sucked out of networking? Of course not! Networking isn't about brusquely exchanging business cards, it's about making true connections with people. But the key is: Before you move those connections straight into friend territory, do have meaningful conversations that help advance your professional goals.

Then, if you make a new friend? It's an added bonus.

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