

From the WEP Career Development Seminar (*offered in spring semesters and open to all engineering students*)

Learn the Fine Art of Mingling to Get Ahead

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Two managers were competing for a promotion. Both were professionally competent and ready to move up. Yet only one of them had outstanding social skills. She was the one who could walk into any social event—whether a dinner meeting or company party—and immediately strike up a conversation with just about anyone. She was outgoing and interesting. She made everyone around her feel comfortable. The other woman crossed her arms when talking to others, didn't make eye contact and often stood by herself at networking events. Small talk was a torment for her.

Guess who got picked for the promotion? The good mingler, of course. Social skills are as important to your success as that Masters in Business Administration you worked so hard to earn. For those who've just been laid off and are looking for their next job, the fine art of mingling at association meetings, job fairs or interviews becomes as valuable an asset as a strong resume. Whether you're selling yourself, or selling your product, or your company's services, knowing how to socialize successfully isn't an option; it's an important business skill these days. It's an essential tool in your efforts to meet people and have them get to know you outside of the traditional office setting. People do business with others they know, like and respect.

Knowing how to strike up conversations with people you know *and* don't know is also a great way to get the inside story or gain valuable information about your department, company or field, giving you an advantage in your work. Yet socializing with ease doesn't come easily to everyone. After business school, some people could benefit from a course in "charm school." The good news is that mingling is a skill that can be mastered by anyone, even the shy individual, as well as those professionals who think they already are great minglers, but only talk about themselves and never express a genuine interest in others.

Keep your body language open. Remember, if you don't look or act nervous, people won't know you are nervous.

So, for those of you who need to brush up on your social skills, here are my nine "Charm School" tips for making a good impression at social business functions:

1. **Have a positive attitude.** If you go into a social situation thinking you will have a horrible time, you *will* have a horrible time. If you go thinking, "I can mingle, I can have an interesting, good time," then you are much more likely to have a positive experience.
2. **Keep your body language open.** I see a lot of people who look like ice kings and queens at business social events. They stand with stern facial expressions. Others cross their arms, wring their hands, stand against the wall or bite their nails. Instead, walk in with a smile. Keep your hands to your sides. And remember, if you don't look or act nervous, people won't know you are nervous.
3. **Follow the 10-5 rule for meeting and greeting.** If you make eye contact with someone within 10 feet of you, you must acknowledge them with a nod or a smile. At 5 feet, you must say something—"Hello," or "Good morning." It's a good rule, because it drives people crazy when others pretend they don't see them!

4. **Dress appropriately.** Wear clothes that fit well and are appropriate to the event. You want to feel good and comfortable in them. It's hard to mingle with confidence if you're dressed inappropriately or your clothes are ill-fitting.
5. **Prepare conversation ahead of time.** People feel much more able to approach others when they have something to say. Read the daily newspaper and know what is going on in the world. Read your professional journals and newsletters and know what's going on in your field.

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6. **Be willing to introduce yourself to new people.** The easiest person to walk up to is the person who is alone. That person is usually grateful for the company. Introduce yourself and shake hands both when you greet the person and when you leave. And remember to keep your drink in your left hand so that your right one is free and dry when you extend it for that handshake. If you're sitting down, turn to the people on either side of you and say hello and introduce yourself.
7. **Ask questions to encourage the other person to talk.** Comment on their answers to continue the conversation. Here are four types of comments you can make:
 - **Expanding:** "Tell me more, it sounds as if you had a great time."
 - **Comparing:** "That sounds as if it is similar to..."
 - **Self-revealing:** "I know what you mean I was in a similar situation last year."
 - **Clarifying:** "What exactly did he do?"
8. **Don't drink too much.** Some people may drink to feel more comfortable in social situations, but it can really backfire on you. You may say or do something you wouldn't normally say or do. If you do decide to drink, stick to the one-drink rule.
9. **Use exit lines.** Not only do you need to say hello, you need to say goodbye. An exit line will help you say goodbye gracefully and leave on a positive note. Don't strive for cleverness, just be sincere: You can simply say, "Nice talking to you," "Good to see you," or "I hope to see you again soon."

Put these tips into practice at your next **business event**. You'll find they work like a charm at putting others and yourself at ease. Before you know it, you'll have won new friends and made some important **new business** connections that could lead to sales—or that promotion you've been working towards.