

Women's Network—The 8 F's of Re-Engagement and Networking Small Talk

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As we return to in-person conferences, networking events, and other gatherings, we may need to dust off our networking and small talk skills. Here are 8 F's to use when starting a conversation or keeping a conversation going as you re-engage.¹

1. Focus: Focus your attention on whomever you are talking with. Over the last two years, so many interactions have been via video conference, where we focused on the camera or the myriad of boxes on our screen. But, for in-person interactions, eye contact helps you connect and conveys your interest in the other person. Focus also on what they say. Active listening is another powerful way to connect. Plus, if you listen closely, you'll hear things you can explore further. As your dialog progresses, focus also on how you can help or support the person you are talking with. People remember those who offer them a helping hand.

2. From: Everyone is from somewhere, so if you are at a loss to start a conversation, this is an easy first question. Just make sure to ask an open question with no embedded assumptions. For example, if you are attending a conference in New York, you could ask, "Do you live in New York?" or "Are you from New York?" Alternatively, focus your "from" question on where they work: "Which organization are you from?"

3. Future: Ask about their future plans: "What are your plans for the weekend?" or "What are you doing this summer?" or "Will you be at the AHLA Annual Meeting?" Their answer may spark a new dialog. Perhaps you have never done the thing they have planned or been to the place they are going. You can learn about it. Perhaps you've got a story you can tell about doing something similar. You can share your experience. Perhaps you are going to be at the same event, and you can plan to re-connect while there.

4. Fun: Everyone does something for fun, whether it is reading, running, rollerblading, or something else. This is often a great way to find a common interest and perhaps open the door for future opportunities to connect. It is also a question that may put the other person at ease if they are nervous about networking. Focusing on something fun helps us relax. Questions to ask include, "Since you live in New York, what do you do for fun here?" or "What do you like to do for fun?" Find their fun and then explore it: "How did you learn to do that?" or "How long have you been doing that?"

5. Favorites: This topic can cover just about anything—sports, food, books, movies, games, travel—the list is infinite. Sometimes you can tie your question to the event venue (beautiful views or great golf course) or the food being served (delicious appetizer or amazing dessert). Sometimes you can draw on a comment they made earlier. Just about anything can be turned into a question about favorites: "What is your favorite conference you've attended?" or "Who was your favorite speaker at this event?" or "What is your favorite dessert?"

6. Fired Up: Find out what they are passionate or fired up about. This can energize the conversation as they get excited to share. Their passion may overlap with what they do for fun or their future plans or their favorite things, but it may not. If you've already discovered their passion, then explore it more deeply by asking, "What about it gets you fired up?" or "How did you get involved in that?"

7. Follow-Up: Follow-up is key. In the moment, follow-up by asking follow-on questions. Be curious. If you are discussing their summer vacation plans, ask if it is a new place or activity for them, how they chose that place or activity, and what they are most looking forward to. After the fact, follow-up means staying in touch. You can do this with an email saying it was nice to meet them, by connecting with them on social media, by adding them to your holiday card list, by meeting up for lunch, or by all of the above.

8. Filter: Remember to re-engage your filter. In contrast to conference calls and video conferences, there is no mute button for in-person interactions.

Keeping these 8 F's in mind will help you re-engage and jump back into the world of regular in-person interactions and networking.² Hopefully, you are now fired up and focused on finding out about others' from, fun, favorites, and future, and you are prepared to follow-up too.

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¹ This list of 8 F's is a composite of life experiences and suggestions learned from other resources. I'm an avid reader and podcast listener. In addition to my own experiences, the resources I used to compile this list include: "Keep Connected" podcast, "Episode 28: Excelling Socially as an Introvert" (January 19, 2022), <https://www.meetup.com/blog/episode-28-excelling-socially-as-an-introvert/>; "Masters in Business" podcast, "Robert Cialdini on the Psychology of Influence" (June 18, 2021), <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/robert-cialdini-on-the-psychology-of-persuasion-podcast/id730188152?i=1000423074089>; Chrissy Scivicque, "The 20 Best Networking Questions to Ask" (updated June 2021), <https://www.ivyexec.com/career-advice/2018/best-networking-questions-ask/>; Robert Cialdini, "Pre-Suasion: A Revolutionary Way to Influence and Persuade" (2016).

² As a personal aside, many of us (myself included) were anxious about networking even before the pandemic. That is normal. While not an F, I offer this additional practical tip: establish goals or ground rules for yourself before each event. A goal may be that you must meet and talk with five new people before you can take a bathroom break. A ground rule may be that you must stay at the event for at least 45 minutes. Goals and ground rules may change over time or based on the event you are attending, but they give you a framework within which you can utilize your 8 F's.