

Guide to Networking Conversation Starters

by Kathy McAfee, America's Marketing Motivator

If you want more interesting conversations, then ask more interesting questions

It has long been my belief that relationships start in conversation. In order for a contact to become a connection, you have to engage in a meaningful conversation. Good conversations help you find the common ground between you, perhaps a shared experience, belief, challenge, motivation, or goal.

It can be awkward starting a conversation with a stranger or speaking with someone that you don't know very well. This is the challenge that awaits you at networking events and meetings.

When networking with people at meetings, conferences, association meetings or conventions, learn to ask more interesting open-ended questions to get the conversation going. Rather than the standard *What do you do for a living?*, why not ask a more creative, open-ended question to get a conversation going and enrich the human exchange?

You will learn more about the other person in a shorter amount of time. You also stand to find more common interests and deeper connections than you would if you only share your job descriptions. You may even learn something new about yourself and have fun in the process.

Try using one of these 40 interesting questions to get the conversation going...

After you have shaken hands and exchanged names, try asking one of these more "personal" questions. To ease into the question, you might want to preface it with a softening phrase and inclusion of their first name. For example, *"I'm curious [their first name]..."* or *"[their first name], I have a question for you...."*

1. What was the first paying job you ever held and how did it help prepare you for the work world?
2. What is one activity on your "bucket list" that you'd like to do in the next year or two?
3. What career ambition have you not yet fulfilled? Why is this important to you?
4. Who has been most influential in your career/work life? How did they help you?
5. What advice would you give to a college student interested in your professional field?



6. What was the most meaningful bit of career advice you've ever received (good or bad)? How has it helped you?
7. If you could change ONE THING about your work day, what would it be?
8. If you could be anywhere else in the world right now, where would you be and doing what?
9. What was the best mistake you ever made in your career? How did it help you grow forward?
10. What do you love most about your job? How does it make you feel when you do that specific activity/function?
11. What did you study in school that has been most useful to you in your current occupation?
12. How did you choose your current profession? (or how did it choose you?)
13. The one that got away. Describe one candidate that you wished you had hired but didn't.
14. Who is the best negotiator you have ever dealt with and what did you learn from them?
15. What would you like to be doing if you weren't doing what you are doing now?
16. What is the most amazing thing someone other than family has ever done for you?
17. If you could make some change in this world, little or big, what would it be and why?
18. What is one new thing that you learned about yourself in the past two weeks?
19. In what environment/place brings out your best creative self?
20. Tell me about a coaching/mentoring moment that you led that you are proud of.
21. What did you want to be when you grew up? In what ways does your current job resemble parts of that early ambition?
22. If you were to go back to school at this age, what subject would you pursue and why?
23. What is the most philanthropic thing you have done in your life? How did it make you feel?
24. Is there something that happened to you as a child that you can honestly say defined who you became as an adult?
25. Why did you choose the book you are currently reading or have recently finished?
26. Share a personal goal that most people would be surprised to hear.
27. What dream has come true for you? What's next?
28. What is one thing that you hope to accomplish this year? Why is that important to you?"
29. What do you appreciate most about yourself and why?
30. Where do you find your inspiration? How do you refill your inspiration reservoir?
31. What is one wrong you would like to right in your life?
32. When do you feel the most powerful? What about the least powerful?
33. What motivates you to action? The carrot or the stick? Give one recent example.
34. What does it take for you to feel comfortable with new people? Give one example.
35. What would you like to be most remembered for at your current company and why?
36. What would you like to be doing for a living if money were no object?

37. Describe a time where fear almost cost you a chance at something amazing.
38. If you were assured you would not fail, what endeavor would you attempt?
39. Do you have a nickname and if so, how did you earn it?
40. Tell me about the most memorable vacation you ever took and why it left such an impression on you?
Where would you like to travel next?

What other questions would you enjoy asking and answering?

Write your question in this box. Experiment and see what works for you in networking.

Practice with speed networking group exercise

Speed networking is the business equivalent of speed dating. It is a great way to make multiple new business connections in a short time. It can add energy and excitement to a networking event, conference, or business meeting where large numbers of people gather.

The goals in speed networking are three-fold:

- 1) Make as many new connections as you can in a short period of time;
- 2) Get to know someone new and gain insight and information about them that will help you personalize your follow up and build a stronger relationship with them;
- 3) Enjoy yourself.



How to facilitate a speed networking exercise

There are many different ways to organize a speed networking exercise.

Here's a set of instruction you can use to organize three rounds of 3 minute networking conversations.

Allow at least 15 minutes for this exercise (i.e., 2 minutes for overview of instructions, 9 minutes for the speed networking round (3 rounds of 3 minutes each), and 4 minutes for the debrief.)

You can do this exercise standing up or sitting down, although sitting will require more logistical set up and instruction to ensure an organized flow.



Directions

You will select 1 person to network with (suggest you pick someone you don't really know very well). Each person should introduce him/herself and then ask the other person an interesting question from the list of questions. You may also wish to exchange business cards at the end of your conversation, so that you can follow up after the event.

You will have three (3) minutes to have a conversation with each other. Time the rounds with a stop watch or a smart phone. When the timer goes off, everyone should stop talking. The instructor will advise the participants to select a new partner and begin a new conversation.

We will do this three times. You may use the same question or try a different one with each round.

At the end of the speed networking exercise, you should have connected with and had conversation with three different people.

Note: for time efficiency, people should be meeting in groups of two, not three. The more people in a group, the longer each round will take.

Speed networking debrief

While the information is still fresh in your mind, write down everything you remember, including their name and any information that they shared with you during your brief conversation.

With a group facilitator, partner or through individual journal, reflect on these important debrief questions:

1. What did you learn about the people you spoke with during this speed networking exercise? What specific information did they share with you? What was important to them? What was unique about them?

2. What did you learn about yourself in this speed networking exercise?

3. How can you use this experience and information to personalize your follow up and stay in closer touch with them? What actions can you take? Give specific examples.

Now follow up. Use this personal insight to craft a personalized follow up message and send after your meeting. You can use email, social media, or create a higher touch follow up, such as a handwritten note, greeting card with the theme of your conversation, etc.

LinkedIn.com is a smart follow up tool to use immediately after your first connection, because it connects you forever, even if they change jobs or emails. Be sure to write a short personal note in your LinkedIn invitation referencing where you met and the nature of your conversation. This will show that you were listening and that you cared enough to spend a few minutes on your follow-up.

Do more of what makes you uncomfortable until it becomes second nature

I encourage you to participate in as many speed networking exercises as you can. It will sharpen your communication skills, build your confidence, and rapidly grow your network.

By asking more interesting questions and engaging in a richer conversation, you can create stronger connections more quickly. If you listen carefully and are genuinely interested in the other person, you will form stronger bonds more quickly and walk away with information that you can use to personalize your follow up.

About the Writer

Kathy McAfee is a motivational speaker, business woman and self-proclaimed *difference maker*, and is known as “America’s Marketing Motivator.” Her personal mission is to inspire business and community leaders to use more of their talent, energy and influence to create positive changes in the world. As an executive presentation coach, she helps her clients to become recognized leaders in their



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