

Networking: Increasing Your Comfort Level

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Networking. A word we all know—not necessarily love—but know. Although networking is an integral part of building a firm, many accountants are uncomfortable with it and would be quite happy if they never had to attend another networking function as long as they lived.

Some comments I've heard accountants make include: "I don't know what to say," "I'm nervous all day when I have to attend a networking function." "The partners expect me to network but it's so uncomfortable." A high level of anxiety about networking makes it difficult, if not impossible, to make it work for you. Networking is all about communicating with others and communicating discomfort and nervousness rather than confidence and competence isn't the type of communication you're after. So what is an accountant to do?

There are three things you can do to become more comfortable with networking:

Learn the networking basics. Networking, like everything else, is a system with strategies and guidelines. Just as you wouldn't attempt to do a tax return without knowing the tax laws, you shouldn't attempt to do networking without knowing the networking "laws." Once you understand the system, you'll find it much easier to work within the system.

Craft a message. What is it you want others to know about you and your firm? Networking provides numerous opportunities to inform, educate, inspire, engage, and entertain others. It is not about collecting a bunch of cards that you don't know what to do with the next day. It is about building relationships, about getting to know other people, about letting them get to know you. Since you're the one sending the message, you have great control and power over what that message is. Before you leave for a networking event, have several messages ready to deliver.

Set goals. Networking is a skill and like all skill, it takes time to develop. Think about where you are in your networking skill, where you want to be, and what steps you can take to get you there. Just as you started out with less complex accounting issues early in your career, start out with less complex networking situations. You might initially set goals to stay a shorter amount of time, meet fewer new people, or attend with a more experienced colleague than you will later with more experience. As you build your skill

and confidence, you can change your networking goals and strategies.

Is networking worth it? Absolutely. Before people buy your accounting services, they must buy you. The way you present yourself and your firm greatly impacts the number of clients you attract and retain and the number of strategic alliances you develop and maintain with other professionals. Yes, developing your networking skills is well worth the effort.