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# NETWORKING BY DESIGN: CRAFTING EVENTS FOR MEANINGFUL CONNECTION



# Introduction

Networking has always been a cornerstone of business events. It provides unique opportunities for knowledge exchange, career advancement, and strategic alliances. However, networking comes in many shapes, many of which go beyond the typical “networking break” or a speed-dating session and technology can be a strong asset.

Meaningful connections often emerge from peer-to-peer learning. Likewise, breakout sessions offer great networking opportunities as they push attendees toward in-depth discussions.

It is important to acknowledge that the networking landscape has significantly transformed recently, primarily driven by the Covid pandemic and the subsequent shift toward remote work. Companies increasingly use events to bring together remote workers, making networking an even more vital component of in-person events.

Ken Holsinger, senior vice president of strategy for Freeman, sees a shift in the current demographics’ priorities. Younger generations prefer to participate in discussions at conferences rather than sit and listen to experts. “Millennials and Gen Z are struggling to catch up quickly with the skills and environment for building the kind of network they need for their careers. The number one place they want to accelerate that is at events,” said Holsinger.

Some industry experts believe the terminology needs an update to better reflect how people connect at events. Adrian Segar, author of “Conferences That Work: Creating Events That People Love,” argues that ‘networking’ no longer represents what attendees seek. “I much prefer to focus on ‘connection’ rather than the word ‘networking.’ Networking

-- it’s very cold. It’s something you need to do to get ahead in business. And my work has always been from a place where fundamentally human beings need connection.”

**“Attendees get the most value from networking when they can learn from experts, exchange ideas with peers, and meet new people.”**

*Source: Freeman Trends Report Q1 2024*

This report uncovers the evolving ethos of networking and explores how planners can shift from traditional, transactional gatherings to creating environments conducive to meaningful connections. Featuring insights from industry experts, it examines innovative strategies in event design, personalized networking tactics, and technology integration to enrich interactions. It explores how thoughtful approaches to venue selection, session formats, and interactive activities can significantly enhance the networking experience, ultimately fostering deeper professional relationships and community engagement.



# Designing for Connection

As the in-person events industry continues to boom, there is an increased focus on intentionally designing networking. The Freeman Trends Report Q1 2024 reveals attendees are searching for more meaningful connections. More attendees would rather bond at a meetup with peers facing similar professional challenges and other topics than participate in a speed-dating-style networking session.

**“Event attendees would be better served if organizers devoted more time to valued forms of networking and reduced their efforts on less-desired elements.”**

*Source: Freeman Trends Report Q1 2024*

According to Holsinger, millennials and Gen Z are driving the need to make meaningful connections, yet are not finding what they are looking for at traditional events. “Loud music, lots of alcohol, very little food, no place to sit—that is not a networking event. But that’s what boomers define as a networking event.”

Devon Pasha, director of North America for the Event Design Collective, said that when planners hear there will be a “networking reception,” they imagine a cheese board, wine and a big space, but putting everyone in a room doesn’t help facilitate connection or bring new people into the fold. “As planners, we know how to set up the room for 60 theater style. We know how to have a coffee break at 10:15 for 150 or 150,000. It’s ingrained in our bones because that’s what we’ve been taught is valuable.” Senior planners often stick with what they know, Pasha said, which often ends up with a setup that no longer serves the needs of attendees.

Rather than set up a networking reception by putting everyone together in one room, Pasha said it helps to dig deeper using the five whys problem-solving method to

uncover the networking goals of the stakeholders. It’s possible to dig down to something more meaningful, such as the corporation or association finding that not enough of its membership knows membership from the other arms, or the domestic membership doesn’t know anyone from international membership, or 60% of its makeup is newcomers who have only been to a corporate or association meeting once or never. They want them to feel at home. “Okay, now we’re getting somewhere,” Pasha said, on understanding the networking goals.

The question also becomes, how do you facilitate people learning among that stakeholder group or the attendees? “When we talk about event design, we talk about four levers you can pull for learning,” Pasha said. “There’s knowledge learning, skill learning, attitude learning and people learning. The strategy is how to pull those levers and to connect them to get to desired outcomes.”





Lee Gimpel, founder of Better Meetings, also uses the five whys to get to the root cause of holding the event or networking session. He noted that the networking piece in event design is very passive. "We just leave it up to the serendipity of these hallway moments and hope people are like, 'Oh my God that was amazing. I met this one person getting cheese.' But it happens pretty rarely, percentage-wise. We can do a much, much better job."



One mistake many planners make is not factoring in a networking plan at the beginning of the process and instead waiting until the event to start connecting attendees. Many industry experts agree that the networking portion of a meeting requires as much forethought as programming the speakers and sessions. Segar said that we are in a world where purposeful connection happens rather than building an event and expecting magic serendipity to make connections. He proposes asking three questions: "Why are you here? What problems do you currently have? And also, what kind of cool things do you know about that other people might find useful?"

According to Liz Lathan, co-founder of The Community Factory, planners should start by determining the client's

goals and objectives. The type of the event and intent dictates the type of connection planners need to help build. "If I'm working on a corporate event, then it's the networking and connections from the client's perspective -- how do we get our salespeople connected with the customers and with the prospects more deeply versus if I'm in an association event, and I really just want to drive connection between the attendees and make sure that my exhibitors are getting to meet the attendees."

Another question to ask is what networking means to the planner's organization. What does it mean for the key stakeholder group and how can a planner facilitate that? That can mean a planner has to step out of their comfort zone. Tahira Endean, who authored the book *Intentional Event Design*, argues that the terminology

isn't important. Networking, connection and engagement are all valid. What matters in creating people-centered, purpose-driven events is finding ways and spaces for people to talk to each other, share ideas and make human connections. "With human connections, ideally, we'll move something forward in life or at work or in an organization or wherever it might be," Endean said.

Many planners resort to ineffective traditional networking event designs. "We put people into welcome receptions and networking receptions. We give them nothing or not very much to eat that has any nutritional value," Endean said. "We might give them alcohol or soda. Then we turn the music up really loud, so you actually can't talk to people because you have to stand and yell at somebody. We're doing all of the things that don't make any sense."

# Rethinking the Essentials to Master Intentional Networking Design

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# Networking Tactics







Many planners have their own tricks for connecting people at events.

She said natural light is also important for making personal connections, as it can improve attendees' well-being and productivity. Utilizing opportunities for kinesthetic learning, where people are moving and having conversations rather than sitting still, also helps. For example, Endean, head of program at IMEX, helps create spaces that enhance connection at IMEX with its wellness lounges and innovation hubs.

Oren Berkovich, the co-founder of Projectory, which focuses on interactive and tactile experiences at events, says networking differs from typical teambuilding activities. "It's not about having fun with your team and building trust. It's about expanding your network. It's about closing deals. It's about connecting with clients and prospects."

**"The basics for a networking event should include good food and hydration, access to nature, and small spaces with low noise levels, "where there's a hum of conversation but not an overwhelming amount of sound."**

*- Tahira Endean, head of program at IMEX and author of Intentional Event Design*



## MAKING THE MOST OF NAME BADGES

According to Claus Raasted, director of The College of Extraordinary Experiences and host of The Innovation Coaching Podcast, planners rarely consider networking part of the event design, and it's either not designed with purpose or poorly designed.

Raasted advocates relying less on technology and more on simple solutions. For example, he strongly believes that the name badge is one of the undervalued pieces of event real estate. It tends to have a big event logo and a QR code to scan for an app or other information, but the name of the attendee and company or country is in smaller letters.

"What if we wrote on everyone's name tag, the name in big letters so you can see it without being awkward. And then write 'this is what I'm interested in. This is what I know stuff about. I'd like to talk about China. I'd like to talk about sustainability, or I'd like to talk about AI,'" said Raasted. He suggested this strategy leads to more random encounters.

JabberYak uses the real estate on its badges to allow people to share and display their seven top interests, which it calls the "7 degrees of interest" principle. JabberYak uses AI-driven data analytics to help connect attendees based on shared interests through tailored icebreakers, gamified interactions, and a networking app.

Another idea Raasted has is for attendees to be able to show their level of desire for interaction with color codes on badges. For example, attendees wearing the red badge invite others to start a conversation with them. Other colors may mean an attendee





is not as open to engagement with strangers. The coding would help those open to interaction find each other and make quicker connections.

## FOSTERING BELONGING

According to David Adler, managing director of Living Room Labs, thoughtfulness is the number one skill set of a good event organizer, whether a meeting, a conference or a board meeting. Getting to the point where people feel connected, which he calls a "goosebump" moment, takes forethought.

Adler referenced David Allison's book *The Death of Demographics: Valuegraphic Marketing For A Values-Driven World*. The book examines how what we value determines what we do and explores how to engage your target audience by knowing what they value. Allison presented a keynote last year at IMEX Frankfurt called *The Belonging Index*, which showed that belonging is America's number one value.

## INVESTING IN THE HUMAN TOUCH

One strategic move to enhance the networking experience and a sense of belonging for attendees, especially first-timers or those more introverted than their peers, is to employ networking hosts or facilitators to guide interactions, make introductions, and encourage engagement.

Shaena Harrison is a wing woman who speaks at conferences about the benefits of her role, which is to help attendees network and connect with one another. "I tend to get hired as a keynote and explain the whole concept of being a wingperson, which totally shifts the energy of the conference."



Harrison's form of matchmaking is mostly spontaneous, based on her talking to many people within a conference. She is at her sweet spot working two-to-three-day conferences with fewer than 10,000 people. She gets to know the attendees by asking who they are and what brought them to this event and, then, helping people strike up conversations. "Other questions can be 'What do you need help with? How can I support you?'" She said that's the one question most people never ask anybody when they first meet them.

Hiring someone specifically to facilitate networking is another beneficial tactic. Phil Mershon, author of "Unforgettable: The Art & Science of Creating Memorable Experiences" and director of experience for Social Media Examiner, is a proponent of networking ambassadors. He has seen first-hand the value of using networking ambassadors to build a tight-knit community at the annual Social Media Marketing World, Social Media Examiner's main event.

**"Networking is the most important activity within an event to attendees, and there is no role within the event team specifically charged with it."**

**- Ken Holsinger, senior vice president of strategy, Freeman**

Holsinger, who leads Freeman's research efforts, has called for event organizers to put programs and personnel focused on networking, just as they do for education and sponsorships.



## INTENTIONAL SESSION FORMATS

Networking shouldn't be limited to specific parts of an event program. It can happen throughout an event, particularly as part of the education, through thoughtful planning to keep attendees actively involved. How sessions or panels are designed can also affect the potential for networking. Segar believes we are moving away from the "broadcast" model, where attendees sit and listen to an expert with a few questions for Q&A at the end.

Instead, he supports the collective knowledge theory, an idea based on "Let's learn about each other." He said meaningful connections integrated into sessions are more useful than the speed dating networking approach, where an app pairs people up and they are given just a few minutes to talk.

Gimpel also asserted that most education sessions and presentations at meetings and conferences are not set up for engagement. Gimpel calls the current setup the "Q&A engagement sandwich," with an expert speaking for 45 minutes or longer to a passive audience and saving five or 10 minutes for Q&A at the end, which can often get compressed if the presentation runs long. "They're not connecting. They're not connecting with the speaker. They're not connecting with each other. And then the conference, sometimes has the gall to say we're doing engaging presentations," Gimpel said. When he works with conference organizers, he prescribes a different approach, focusing on a much shorter presentation, about 15 minutes, and saving the rest of the time for Q&A or more of a fireside chat.

Gimpel said another tactic is for the interviewer or presenter to say, "I just want you to turn to the person next to you, what did you hear? What's relevant to you? What questions do you have for our speaker?" This type of engagement spurs excellent networking.

**"Even if the speaker makes an impact, most attendees won't remember what they talked about in six month's time, whereas connections can be life-changing."**

*- Adrian Segar, author of "Conferences That Work: Creating Events That People Love"*







One of Segar's pet peeves is when planners focus on hiring a marquee inspirational keynote speaker, thinking that will be the main driver for attendance. "Someone who just climbed Everest with one leg or whatever comes, and they pay them a hell of a lot of money. And then it's inspirational if they're good. Sometimes they're terrible."

## COMFORTING SETTINGS

Creating an effective room layout to foster networking at events requires thoughtful planning to ensure that the physical space encourages interaction and engagement. The ideal room layout for networking should facilitate easy movement, comfortable interactions, and natural conversation flow.

According to Endean, the maximum number of people at a table for good conversation flow is six people. The usual large roundtables for ten people in a lunch or dinner gala don't facilitate connection. What can work better for seating is to offer a mix of seating options, including high-top tables, lounge areas, and traditional seating with enough options for informal conversations that don't make attendees feel crowded. Designated networking zones on a show floor can also foster engagement. Details like ambient lighting and good acoustics are key, as well.

Adler said that design is all about neuroscience. Before an event, he consults with the neuroscientist about details like the centerpiece. "The centerpiece at a table balances the neurons in the brain." The room's colors and lighting are important for mood creation. Adler also believes soundtracks are going to become very important. "You need to use all of those things in your toolkit."

Simple solutions to how a room is set up could facilitate networking. For example, identifiable zones for participants, such as a loud music zone and a quiet zone, would draw like-minded attendees. There could also be designated areas within the event space specifically designed for networking, with refreshments and comfortable seating. Raasted tells attendees to add an extra free chair whenever they are sitting. This makes others feel invited to sit down when they pass by. Then, that person also brings over an empty chair, and the group keeps growing and welcoming more people. “That goes a long way in making people feel like they are welcome,” he noted.

Berkovich uses a clever tactic to deliver networking opportunities right to the last minute, as the floor or presentation area starts to thin out. In addition to removing some chairs so the area doesn't look empty, Berkovich suggests organizing a planned group selfie with the host of the last talk onstage. This brings everybody together to the front of the room for the last session and keeps them there. “Everybody gets close to the stage because they were coming close to take that selfie, and then sat down. So you end up with a more intimate setting for closing,” he said.

## ACTIVITIES THAT CONNECT

A popular way to bring people together is through an icebreaker. While ineffective icebreakers feel forced and contrived, effective ones have the power to launch successful business ventures, friendships, and more. There are many different options for icebreakers, so picking the right one is more about knowing your audience.

Icebreakers can even be used for people who know each other. Endean recently spoke at an event with just over 20 people who all knew each other. But on the final morning, the organizers requested an icebreaker to get to know each other better. “At a dinner that evening they had a higher level of intimacy and trust with new people in the room and were then able to create deeper connections and have different conversations.”

Keeping the numbers small is key for any networking activity. Endean says the maximum community size is about 150 people. “When you get into an event that has 1,000 people or 10,000 people, how do you start to break down some of those silos?”







Some events promote meetups based on personal subjects, such as knitting or hosting meetups based on work-related subjects. Lathan prefers to have a shared experience or a shared activity to help foster networking. At a recent Cvent CONNECT in San Antonio, Lathan spotted a big paint-by-numbers mural where attendees could pick out their paint and start painting. Painting collaboratively led to conversation, even starting with something as simple as, “Oh, hey, look at you staying inside the lines,” she said. According to Lathan, having activities that people are doing together allows a spontaneous moment of collision that probably wouldn’t have happened if they were just standing by the cheese cubes at a typical network reception. “Now they’re doing something together, and it allows the introverts and the extroverts to have a conversation.”

Another tactic Lathan has experienced was at an event on a beach for an opening reception where attendees had to pick up a stick when they walked in and then pick which one of the bonfires they would add their stick to, which helped facilitate conversations with others at the same bonfire and helped connect attendees before the start of the event.

Lathan often has attendees share their challenges on big sticky notes in a prominent area so that others explore them in their own time throughout the event. People with a common challenge or those with experience solving it often start to connect.

For small groups, both Adler and Endean espouse the idea of the Jefferson dinner—a table of 12 with a single group conversation. “Eventually, you get to a place where there’s cross-talk, but it sets the stage for everyone to have an opportunity to talk on a specific topic,” Endean said. Jefferson dinner participants start with one question to help break the ice. Adler uses the prompt, “What was your first job, and what did you learn from it?”

# The Key Role of Destinations and Venues



Destination choice can also play a factor in helping attendees connect. Every destination has attributes that can work towards the networking intent. Bringing the local culture and communities into the event design can create shared experiences that connect, and these are often some of the most memorable moments for events.

In general, attendees are more likely to move around freely and quickly at smaller destinations. If nature is nearby, this can add an extra dimension to the attendee experience.

For example, at smaller destinations, networking can easily start before attendees enter the venue, possibly at the hotel on the way to the meeting. “If it’s a huge city and everything is spread around, people won’t meet, but if you have smaller cities or the venues are close by or there are official hotels and you make sure that people booked these hotels, they can meet again in the evenings in the in the hotel lobby or hotel bar, and continue networking there,” said Sina Bunte an event designer focusing on hybrid and digital events.

While smaller destinations can feel more intimate and open multiple possibilities for networking, large cities can offer other advantages. For example, VIP experiences, including exclusive access to iconic entertainment and attractions, can be incredibly impactful, and most are located in large cities.

Facilitating networking in large cities can be achieved through advanced planning. Lisa Messina, chief sales officer for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA), said it’s important for destinations to get involved in the event design process early on. The first step is to connect with the event organizer to learn more about what they are trying to accomplish and their vision for the event. According to





Messina, consulting at inception regarding the event's design reveals key information about the demographics of attendees, their budget, and a bit about the culture of their organization and community.

The role of destination management organizations (DMOs) like the LVCVA is not only to connect planners with venues and assets but also to help planners benefit

from the learnings and experiences of other customers. "We've got a lens on how it worked for other organizers. So, we can say, 'Here's an example of this event that happened, and this was the learning from it. This was the ROI from it,'" said Messina.

Interconnected venues can also be ideal for providing attendees with networking opportunities around hospi-

talities. Major convention centers tend to have large hotels close by. Large restaurants and bars make it easier for attendees to mingle before or after the day's events or even have an after-party. The hospitality offered by convention hotels is convenient and of a high standard, which is why it has become an integral part of the convention experience. "That's where a lot of networking gets done is over dinner and over drinks," said Nicol Chervenak, director of planning and program management for the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority, which owns and operates the McCormick Place convention center in Chicago.

While large convention centers may not seem like the most exciting place to connect, these are flexible spaces that can be infinitely customized to suit networking needs. There is also a trend towards networking-friendly public spaces and lobbies. For example, when the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C., renovated its public spaces in 2019, it took cues from customers who requested more flexible networking spaces. The renovations included upgrading and adding more furniture in its concourses and outside meeting rooms to allow attendees to relax between sessions and network in open, naturally lit spaces.



# How Technology Can Best Support Networking

Elfreth's Alley.



Tech tools for networking range from the basic, such as creating Facebook or WhatsApp groups for attendees, to the more sophisticated, such as using AI technology to help bring attendees together.

Mershon has used Facebook groups to gather attendees before the event. While this can work well, it can also be overwhelming. One year, he created 17 Facebook groups to help serve all the niche groups of people coming to the conference. That many groups ended up being a waste of time and effort on his staff's part. "Most people felt more confused by it than helped, even though it came from the right heart. We were trying to manufacture community by creating all these groups, and I think undermined that," said Mershon.

## MOBILE EVENT APPS

Many events have their own mobile apps specifically designed to offer features like attendee directories, personalized agendas, chat features and interactive maps. Apps can help attendees find each other and connect easily.

A wide range of companies offer fully featured event apps that give attendees access to resources like attendee lists, in-app messaging, discussion groups, matchmaking algorithms and even gamification right in the palm of their hands. Some apps offer group chat based on topics of interest, while others feature social walls that use AI to identify attendees in event photos.

Smart badges like Bizzabo's Klik SmartBadge pair wearable technology with advanced event apps. Rather than relying on QR codes or other scanning technologies to exchange contact information, smart badges offer an intuitive and highly tactile way for attendees to connect with each other. Badges can even be programmed with light cues to indicate mutual interests, making it easier for attendees to connect with relevant contacts.

## ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY

AI technology is already used in most event apps and matchmaking tools, as it helps facilitate networking and connection before, during and after events. "I think one of the things that is a huge opportunity for us today is AI and the role that it can help in serving up the right people to you," Mershon said.

Whether AI-powered or not, matchmaking technology increases the chances of meaningful connections by pairing individuals with similar interests or complementary business needs. This technology can be instrumental in running pre-scheduled or facilitated meetings at events, including those with hosted buyers.

Braindate takes a slightly different approach, asking attendees to post topics of interest on the platform. The



technology then matches attendees with similar interests and sets up meetings. Braindate recommends that a core group of ambassadors pre-populate topics on the platform, which helps produce a mix of topics relevant to the event and personal topics.

**“[AI] doesn’t replace human connections, but it does at least facilitate human connections.”**

*- Phil Mershon, author of “Unforgettable: The Art & Science of Creating Memorable Experiences” and director of experience at Social Media Examiner*

One benefit of event technology that should not be overlooked is the ability to collect data about events, including the extent of networking among attendees. Technology can be used to track things like the number of connections made at a meeting and business deals closed directly related to it. Post-event surveys or feedback forms can also gather attendees’ perspectives on the networking opportunities provided. Furthermore, apps and community platforms can facilitate discussion afterward, becoming online communities that keep the post-event conversation going.



# Conclusion



Intentional networking involves thoughtful planning and execution across multiple facets of an event. By creating a conducive environment, integrating technology, facilitating interactions, and ensuring follow-up, organizers can significantly enhance the quality and effectiveness of networking using a holistic approach that ensures attendees meet new people and form meaningful and lasting connections.

The insights and strategies discussed in this report highlight the significant transformation in networking practices within the events industry. Industry experts advocate for more personalized and human-centric approaches, moving away from traditional formats and embracing new methods that cater to the needs of today's diverse workforce. Focusing on meaningful connections, well-considered event designs, and the appropriate use of technology can significantly improve the quality of event interactions.

The successful implementation of these practices improves individual events and contributes to the broader goal of building sustainable and successful professional communities. As the industry continues to adapt and innovate, the value of deep connections remains a consistent priority, proving crucial in fostering professional growth and business success.