

10 Ways To Make Meaningful Connections In Association Chapter Networking Events - A Conversation With NACE's Sarah James



Think about the association chapter networking events you attended when you just joined your chapter, or when you just started your career. If they were like most, you were probably pretty uncomfortable. With a glass in one hand, business cards in the other, you scanned the room trying to figure out who to approach, while no one approached you or made introductions. Most likely those first few association chapter networking events felt clinical and inauthentic, and you wondered how long you had to stay.



It's critical to ensure those attending your association chapter networking events (like your chapter millennials, who hate traditional networking!) don't feel anything like that. Sarah James, former National Association of Catering & Events (NACE) Alamo program chair and now a member of the NACE national board as chapter leader council member discusses how to make association chapter networking events engaging, interesting, and relevant for everyone.

10 Ways to Make Networking Engaging for Everyone

Have clear, written goals. Know what you and attendees want to get out of the event. "People put events on all the time without a clear purpose or goal," Sarah says. But to structure an event properly,



she adds, “you need to understand what a successful event will look like to attendees. Is that as many contacts as possible, or deeper connections with just a few people? “It’s never just networking,” she explains. “There’s always a goal to ID in advance.”

Keep the event small. It’s overwhelming enough to walk into a crowded room filled with strangers. Consider smaller events, capping an event at a certain number, or breaking a larger group into smaller ones for easier communication and connection.

Don’t forget the name tags. Name tags make it less stressful for people to approach and connect with others. They make introductions easier and put everyone on equal footing because everyone is wearing one. “People using your name,” says Sarah, “automatically endears you to a person. You make a connection and get mentally excited.”

Consider color coded name tags, with different colors for your association chapter board and committee members, and ask attendees to wear them in a place that’s highly visible.

Share an attendee list beforehand. Include short bios of some of the registered guests in your email communications and association chapter event marketing. Providing this ahead of time can make it easier for connections, save time and anxiety, and give some of your guests a little publicity.

Use a facilitator. Sarah believes facilitators are a critical piece of a successful chapter event, “especially at the beginning, as they can start conversations” that people may not be willing to do on their own. Depending on the size of the group, you may want to designate several facilitators.

Do some icebreakers. Icebreakers get people comfortable and communicating with each other. You can do some with the whole group, while others are great for one-on-one conversations. Several NACE chapters have used a version of speed dating Sarah calls “speed networking.” To make it a little easier on people; to get the right organic conversations going; and to make it “more than a business card swap,” she recommends providing a few questions beforehand. Questions can be serious and work related or laid back and fun, as laughter delivers an instant connection. Consider questions like:

- If your life were a movie, what movie would it be, and why?
- What song represents your business right now?
- What’s the last book you read and what do you remember about it?



Take a group photo. And some candid shots. And send them to those who attended. Besides memorializing the event, pictures help remind attendees who they met. You can also post these photos on your social media, so those who didn't make it can see some of what they missed.

Keep it short. Your event isn't the only thing attendees have to accomplish on that day. Many of them are tight on time and meetings of around two hours can allow you to meet the goals you've set for the meeting.

Add a little competition. It "works well for almost everyone," Sarah says, "and can be so much fun." Some NACE chapters hold catering competitions and industry-specific trivia nights, great ways for people to get to know each other, if they aren't paired with people they already know. Simple, silly prizes are great, like trophies, chapter swag or taking home the leftover food.

Use the Five Senses to Set the Right Stage

Adding a connection to each of our five senses, Sarah explains, is an important way to help with the energy of an association chapter networking event. To ensure your event has the intended effect on attendees, think about things like:

- Sight. What do you want attendees to see and feel? Bright light is energizing, while dim is more intimate.
- Smell. Are you going to have the windows open or closed?
- Taste and touch. Food and drink give people something to do with their hands and their mouths, and a reason to not talk.
- Sound. background music is extremely useful, especially for the first few people to show up to an event. What's worse than being the first one in a silent room?

Making people comfortable, Sarah says, varies by group. You need to know who will be there and what they want to get from the event, to ensure people aren't standing in corners pretending to check email and trying to make a quick exit. "Find people the right business connections, and a little bit of a personal connection," she says, "and they'll keep coming back, because they're having a good time, in addition to building business."

