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## Mixing Business with Pleasure: The Networking Quandary

By Dr. Woody

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Networking is necessary to building your brand.

A common mistake that many make at business functions and lunch/dinner meetings is the mixing of overindulgence and under-engagement.

All too often, people are more focused on eating and drinking than on making meaningful connections. This can be problematic when it comes to building your business.



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Nearly every time I walk into a business event I'm greeted by people obsessively ramming food in their face or scrambling to grab as many free cocktails as they can carry. It's as if the lure of free (or pre-paid) ingestible goods somehow wipes away all sensibility.

Considering our national struggle with obesity, I probably shouldn't be surprised, but I still get frustrated nonetheless. If you want to effectively network, you have to have focus and balance. It's hard to have a very productive conversation with a mouth full of mini pot stickers. So, here are some things to consider before you embark on your next networking endeavor.

### Have a Purpose

When deciding on the events to attend and lunches to arrange, make sure to have clear goals. Ask yourself who you want to meet and for what purpose. It's important to have your targets in mind and an idea of the approach you are going to use to engage them. On numerous occasions I've had meetings requested or been pulled aside at an event only to find out that the individual really didn't have any sense as to where they wanted to go with the conversation. If you don't have a plan you can't expect to accomplish anything. Before you walk out the door, sketch out your plan of attack and have your talking points ready.

### Be Weary of Socializers

Socializing and networking are two very different things. Always be weary of socializers. These are the folks that are just there to chat, hang, out, and... well... socialize.

More often than not, these are the folks that are slamming cocktails and stuffing their faces. These extraverted individuals are feeding their inner drive for human contact and expression. There is nothing wrong with this, just keep in mind that your time is valuable. You don't want to get caught up spending a lot of time with someone who is more interested in getting attention than making a meaningful connection.

### You are NOT There for the Food

When presented with a flavorful array of tasty options it's hard to resist the temptation to indulge. There is something strangely enticing about the novelty of the daily special or signature item. However, keep in mind you aren't there for the food as much as you are there for the meeting. Sometimes going with the conservative no-mess choice can help keep you focused on the task at hand.

I'll never forget a lunch meeting I had a number of years ago with a former student. She was my star student from an organizational psychology class I taught during my time as a doctoral student. I was very excited to see her as she had recently started her first professional job for a Fortune 500 company. Just a few minutes into the meeting I was quickly reminded of her youth.

When the server came over she promptly ordered the restaurant's signature "monster" burger. When this porterhouse-sized slab wrapped in two buns was presented to her, I could see the look of concern all over her face. For the remainder of the lunch, the poor girl struggled to eat her meal while desperately trying to protect her white silk blouse. It wasn't a pretty sight and needless to say, she learned a good lesson.

Remember, it's not about the food; it's about the conversation. If you really are looking to make a meaningful connection, the food should be secondary.

### Sip Don't Slog

Cocktails can be tempting, especially when they are free. Remember, you are representing yourself and your primary goal is to make the right impression. Learning to drink in moderation is a critical business skill. In order to put your best foot forward, you will need to keep your wits about you.

A good practice is to grab a soda water with a lime. It not only keeps you on an even pace, it also helps keep the revelers at bay by tricking them into thinking you are indulging right alongside them. At the end of the day, keep your primary objective in mind. There is a time and place for everything. It's up to you to decide when to indulge and when to focus.

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