



Graceful Exit Strategies

by Robbie Samuels, Professional Speaker | Author | Podcast Host | Coach

You've done it! You're in a conversation at the conference. You feel like it's going well and you've enjoyed chatting. The whole time you've been a little nervous because you never know how to wrap up conversations and often feel like you get stuck in them.

Going to networking events can have its challenges: For some attendees getting into a conversation is difficult, but for many wrapping up a conversation is the real challenge.

How do you know when to move on, and how do you wrap up a conversation gracefully?

Mindfulness

Are you feeling distracted and unable to focus on what your conversation partner is saying? Are you having difficulty maintaining eye contact with the person speaking and keep looking over their shoulder at the person who looks like, no definitely is, your ex (or boss, person you want to date or work for, best friend from third grade, etc.)? Notice this is happening. Become aware of yourself in the room. Self-awareness will help you know when it's time to wrap up the conversation.

Bored or Boring?

Self-awareness will help you realize you are tired (or hungry, worried about the meter running out on your parking space, etc.). None of these distractions have anything to do with whether the person you're speaking with is boring.

These are about you and what's going on in your body and mind. If you need to use the restroom and the person you're speaking with is telling an exciting story, you won't register the same enthusiasm you usually would. You would appear distracted.

If you kept checking your phone to see if the babysitter has texted her check-in, you would appear bored—although this has nothing to do with how engaging your conversation partner is. Time to wrap the conversation up so you can deal with whatever is distracting you.

If you notice these signs in the person you're speaking with, it doesn't necessarily mean you're boring, but it does mean you should wrap things up.

Internal Clock

What if you really hit it off with someone and you're having an amazing conversation? Wonderful! That's excellent. Even so, have a sense of how much time is passing. Your goal (and likely theirs) was to meet or reconnect with several people at the event, so squirreling away with one person for most of the night isn't advantageous for either of you.

Tell them you've really enjoyed the conversation and would love to stay in touch. Invite them to attend an upcoming event you have on your calendar or ask where else you might run into each other. You could even share with them that you're trying to get better at networking so you've set goals for yourself to meet more people.

End on a High Note

The key is to always leave them wanting more. Whether you're having a really great conversation or after a few questions realized it wasn't going anywhere, you want to leave them feeling good about you. Then when you see them later in the evening, they will naturally be inclined to introduce you to the people they are standing with.

Ask to be Introduced

If you're new to a space, a great way to wrap up a conversation is to ask to be introduced: "Do you know anyone here you think I should meet?" This usually leads to some brainstorming. When they mention a specific name, say, "Great. Will you introduce me?"

This works best if you're speaking to someone who's a regular at these events, but it could work if they even know only one other person in the room. This allows them to be a connector. They've learned a little bit about you and can use this information to try and make a great introduction to someone else at the event.

Results will vary, but this method will help you get closer to making the best connections possible in the room. It will also assist you if someone has glommed on to you at the conference, because you can always offer to make an introduction if other attempts to wrap up fail you.

I used this technique when I was at a very large convention's "after party"—where the music was too loud and the lights too low to actually network. The person I was speaking with was a college student, and I had been out of school for nearly two decades. When it became apparent we had nothing else to talk about I asked if he knew anyone else there he thinks I should meet. He lit up and asked if I wanted to meet so-and-so. I said yes, and a moment later was being pulled through the crowd up to... his intern supervisor.

He didn't have to know dozens of people I'd want to meet, just one. His supervisor was a senior executive at a nonprofit in my area and a quality contact in a vast sea of people I didn't know. The college student introduced us, I thanked him, and he walked away quite proud he had made our connection happen.

Something to keep in mind—interns work for people important enough to have interns. So don't discount the quality of the introduction based on the experience level of the person doing the introducing.

Numbers Game

One other thing to keep in mind when you're trying to decide if it's time to move on is the number of people in the conversation with you. If there are three or more people in your group, you can slide away with a gesture and a murmur when others are talking. You don't need to look each person in the eye, shake their hand, and tell them you're walking away. You just say, "I'm going to go mmmm..." trailing off as you walk away. Easy as pie.

Take notice when there are only three of you because if someone other than you walks away, there will only be two of you. At this point, you need to decide whether it's time to wrap up the conversation by asking to be introduced (or offering to introduce them). You may also want to invite someone else to join you, which would then allow you to step away once they became engaged in conversation. As I said, it's far easier to gracefully step away when there are three or more people in your group.

Grip, Grin, and Go

What if it's just the two of you and you're ready to wrap up the conversation? What do you do and say to exit gracefully?

It's a three-step process that needs to be done without interruption. Start by shaking their hand (grip), then with a smile (grin), say something nice (e.g., "It was great to see you here," "I enjoyed meeting you," or "Pleasure speaking with you."), and then walk away (go).

If you've had trouble ending a conversation, it's possible you interrupted this three-step process. Have you ever shaken someone's hand, said "it was great to meet you," and then thought of something else you wanted to say?

If you say what you were thinking and then chat for a few more minutes, you've wasted the social cue of handshaking. It's entirely possible when you once again shake hands, the person you are speaking with will interrupt with a comment or question.

Yes, you're now stuck a bit, but who started it? You have some control over how successful the social cue of a handshake is. Your hands and feet need to be in sync. If you shake hands, your feet need to walk away. You can always circle back to chat with this person again later in the evening or send a follow-up email.

The goal is to leave them on a high note so they are looking forward to seeing or hearing from you again. Staying in touch is the basis of relationship building, which after all is the point of networking.

"Graceful Exit Strategies" is an excerpt from "Croissants vs. Bagels: Strategic, Effective, and Inclusive Networking at Conferences" available at www.CroissantsvsBagels.com.

About Robbie Samuels

Prior to becoming recognized as a “networking expert” by *Inc.* and *Lifehacker*, and author of the best-selling business book *Croissants vs. Bagels: Strategic, Effective, and Inclusive Networking at Conferences* – Robbie was the Senior Manager of Events and Donor Engagement at a nonprofit in Boston for nearly a decade. Through this role, he oversaw 25 fundraising events a year that raised nearly \$1million annually.

Robbie believes networking is a marketing strategy and as a professional member of the National Speakers Association, has been speaking on the topic of inclusive and engaging connections for over a decade. He works with meeting professionals and conference organizers to design experiences that engage all participants, especially first-timers and those attending solo. Learn more about Art of the Schmooze, his signature talk, at www.ArtoftheSchmooze.com.

As a consultant, coach, author, and speaker he shares how to shift your mindset around relationship building, so you discover new connections and business opportunities in the world around you – and know how to act on them.

Listen to On the Schmooze podcast for more networking tips from Robbie and interviews with talented leaders: www.OntheSchmooze.com. Learn more about Robbie and his work at www.RobbieSamuels.com.

Want content you can share with your event participants? Download “Ten Tips for Conference Connections” at www.RobbieSamuels.com/MPI.