

NET WORKING

THE ROOM

EVERY PARTY CAN BE A BUSINESS-BUILDING OPPORTUNITY, YOU JUST NEED TO KNOW HOW TO MAKE THE RIGHT MOVES, WRITES **SARAH HOLLINGWORTH**.

With an estimated 80 per cent of new business coming from referrals, the saying "It's not what you know, but who you know" rings ever true. Once, networking was considered a dirty word, but today's society acknowledges its role in furthering business and personal success.

Lisa Butler, author of *Networking Exposed* and director of Brisbane-based company Paragon Associates, says that networking is an everyday occurrence and people should take a holistic approach to it. "Networking is an important life skill," she says. "It's how you build relationships, interact and keep in touch."

For some, a Christmas party is a good excuse to relax and toast the year's end, while for others it's an important time to form new relationships.

Melbourne milliner and fashion designer Melissa Jackson believes the Christmas party circuit is a great opportunity to build business, but says it's less about the 'hard sell' than it is about the 'social side' of her business.

"It's a really useful way to build my profile in a relaxed setting and to meet a broader network of people," she says. "You never know who you might meet and how you might be able to help each other in the future."

Beth Thomson, the communications manager for Networking World – an online Australia-wide resource for networking – says Jackson's softly-softly approach is the key to clever networking.

"When you're talking to someone, it's more effective to find out what they do and how you



can help them," she says. "It's not about how you're going to get the sale; it's about building the relationship."

"The most effective networkers are those who've asked lots of questions and taken an interest in you," says Butler. "As Greta Garbo once said, 'A brilliant conversationalist doesn't talk about themselves, [but] talks with you about you.'"

First impressions can be lasting ones and, as with any social interaction, there are rules of etiquette with networking. Butler says one of the most important is 'good introductions' – for example, using first and last names as well as giving some context around the people who you are introducing (or, as Bridget Jones puts it, using 'thoughtful details').

"It makes people feel more comfortable and it shows you've listened and understood [the] information about them," says Butler.

It's also important not to be juggling food and drinks. "The rule of the jungle is never approach an eating animal," laughs Butler. "No-one is going to come up and introduce themselves to you if you're struggling with messy food."

of meaningful questions. Find out who'll be there. Have you met them before? What do you know about them? These techniques will help you feel more comfortable conversing with people."

Jackson, a perennial partygoer, often attends events by herself because that way she believes she meets new people more effectively. "If I am arriving by myself, I'll often try to find out who else will be there," she says. "That way, I can confidently walk up to a group and join the conversation."

While Thomson says it's not always easy getting access to a list of people attending a function, Butler suggests always asking. "People often assume that if a guest list is not sent, it's not available, but that's not always the case, so don't be afraid to ask."

In the world of formal networking events, the summer holidays can be a slow time, which makes attending Christmas parties all the more important. Thomson points out that the follow-up to a party is even more critical.

"Send people Christmas cards saying 'It was great meeting you the other night. I'm looking forward to catching up in 2008...' No-one's checking their emails, but it's a great time to send a card." ■

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Jackson says she usually tries to eat before heading to a function. "Firstly, it's not advisable to drink on an empty stomach," she says. "And secondly, I don't have to worry about being asked questions with a mouth full of food."

Butler emphasises that body language is also crucial. "No-one will want to approach you if your body language isn't welcoming," she explains, adding that men tend to prefer standing side-by-side, while most women stand square-on when conversing.

"Males in a group will be in a semi-circle, making it easier to join in, and females, typically, get fairly closed," she says. "The eye contact is quite intense and the conversation topics get more intimate, which can make it harder to break in."

More broadly, Thomson and Butler agree that it's vital to be prepared for parties. Come armed with business cards (which are to be handed out discerningly) and try to find out in advance who'll be attending.

"The more comfortable and confident people are, the more likely they'll find the event successful," says Butler. "A lot of that comes from preparation. Put together a list

