

Do People Mix at Mixers? New Study Sheds Light on Behavior at Events

Thinking about hosting a mixer, a cocktail party, or a networking gathering as part of your next event? If so, you are certainly not alone.

According to one recent study, the meetings, conferences, and exhibitions industry generated \$122 billion in direct spending in 2004. This spending ranks the industry as the 29th-largest contributor to the gross national product. And parties, mixers, and networking opportunities are not confined to the meetings industry; some 90 percent of corporate workplaces host a holiday party.

This data forms the basis of the work of Paul Ingram and Michael W. Morris, both of Columbia Business School at Columbia University in New York. These statistics, they say, point to a perception that “profession- and job-related social events such as mixers are viewed by organizations and individuals as incubators of interpersonal ties, as arenas in which individuals can initiate new and different contacts.” It comes as a surprise, then, that very little research has been done regarding people’s behavior at mixers, either with an eye to determining their effectiveness in fostering new relationships or to identifying the factors that make people more likely to interact.

Ingram and Morris conducted a study in which members of an executive MBA program were invited to a mixer. Using nTAGs, electronic name badges which register encounters and their duration, the pair measured the interaction between pairs of people measured over time. They correlated this data with previously gathered information about attendees’ preexisting perceptions of one another and some basic demographic information. Their findings shed light on the kinds of behavior you can expect at your next networking event or mixer.

Finding #1: Don’t talk to strangers

Mixer events are designed to help people meet one another; without the pressure to make small talk with the host or reconnect with old friends,

attendees are freed to form and cement new relationships. But the research indicates that this is not happening as much as one might expect.

Most of the attendees in Ingram and Morris’ study said their goal was to meet new people during the mixer event. However, the study results show that people are more likely to talk to other people they knew well, with those in the study much more likely to interact if they had a positive pre-mixer relationship.

ANY EFFORTS THAT INCREASE INTERACTION AMONG UNACQUAINTED ATTENDEES EARLY IN THE EVENT MAY PAY DIVIDENDS IN INTERACTION LATER ON.

However, the first part of a mixer may be the critical time for determining whether attendees will meet new people. Ingram and Morris found that attendees were more likely to interact later in the event if they had encountered common others earlier in the mixer; the same did not hold true for pre-mixer relationships. So any efforts that increase interaction among unacquainted attendees early in the event may pay dividends in interaction later on.

Finding #2: Birds of a feather do not always flock together

Ingram and Morris gathered data on attendees’ sex and race and assigned measures of physical attractiveness, undergraduate university status, and job function. Surprisingly, they found that guests were not more likely to interact with other guests to whom they were similar. This contradicts much of the existing research about friendship and relationships, which suggests that relationships are more likely among people with similarities. However, this

seemingly different behavior at mixers points to a real opportunity for event planners who would like to encourage interaction among attendees with specific dissimilarities.

The researchers suggest that mixers and other circumstances in which people can meet in groups may “lower the threshold for desired similarity and therefore promote contacts between dissimilars.” This has implications for those who would like to encourage interaction among individuals from different races. “If a group is attractive to racial minorities merely by virtue of containing at least one person of the same race, it can provide a context for contact between races that may be comfortable for all.” Taking steps to welcome attendees of various races is one step toward increasing the chances that conversational groups will include members of different races and therefore be attractive to a wide range of individuals hoping to join in.

“The results in this regard should provide encouragement for anyone who seeks to break the bonds of homogenous social relationships. If there are people of different sex, race, educational background, and job type at a mixer, they are quite likely to encounter and engage with each other. Thus, mixers may present an important opportunity to facilitate meetings between people whose differences make it unlikely that they will meet in everyday life,” Ingram and Morris write.

Finding #3: Don’t spare the nametags

As with all good academic studies, the researchers had to account for any factors that may have influenced behavior, and the biggest difference between the study mixer and one that might occur otherwise was the presence of the nTAGs. Did these electronic devices influence interaction?

Ingram and Morris conjecture that the nTAGs did influence behavior, but no more so than any less sophisticated method of identifying attendees. “They played the role that nametags always do at a mixer, albeit in

Asking for a Raise or Promotion: 10 Pitfalls to Avoid

How long has it been since you've had a real, meaningful raise? Not just a cost of living bump or a token bit of extra, but something really noticeable in your paycheck? And how long has it been since you've had a real promotion?

Jim Camp is an internationally sought negotiation coach and trainer and author of *NO: The Only Negotiating Strategy You Need for Work and Home* (Crown), the revised and updated version of his critically acclaimed business book *Start with No*. As president and founder of the Camp Group, he has coached individuals, companies, and governments worldwide through hundreds of negotiations, including clients from Motorola, Texas Instruments, Merrill Lynch, IBM, and Prudential Insurance.

The creator of systematic decision-based negotiating, known as the "no system," for short, Camp offers the

following advice for those seeking more money, more responsibility, and a tangible sign of career progress:


RESEARCH WHAT PEOPLE IN YOUR POSITION GET PAID. FIND OUT WHAT OBSTACLES STAND IN YOUR WAY.

When you're ready to ask for a raise or a promotion, here are 10 pitfalls to avoid:

1. Telling your employer you hope she'll say yes. On the contrary, start by inviting your boss to say no. Tell her you're comfortable with a no answer and you want her to be comfortable to say no. This puts her at ease and clears the air.

2. Being emotional. Turn your mind into a blank slate. Have no expectations, hopes, or fears. Above all, overcome all neediness, the number one deal-killer. Not needing this raise or promotion gives you power.

3. Going into the meeting unprepared. Research what people in your position get paid. Find out what obstacles stand in your way. Has the company just laid off employees? Is there new management in the wings? Know all issues that might keep your boss from giving you a raise. State each problem clearly and ask your boss how these problems might be solved.

4. Trying to impress your boss. Never dress to impress, brag, or be pretentious. Let her feel completely at ease with 

MIXERS from page 5

a more novel way," they write.

Nametags foster interaction in two important ways, the researchers explain. In some cases, they serve as a low-risk way to initiate interaction. "Our observation and the reports of guests indicated that the nTAGs made it easier to initiate contact, acting as an icebreaker, something that people could joke about or discuss to overcome the awkwardness associated with initiating an encounter," they write. This indicates that a unique or interesting nametag could be a great tool to help people find that first conversation topic.

Second, however, the nTAGs made the attendees part of an exclusive club. Ingram and Morris cite research about the effect of invitations to private parties; because the guests have all been invited to attend by the host, they

feel tacit approval to approach any other guest and consider it rude to refuse an interaction.

Similarly, a nametag like the nTAG functions to make people part of a group that feels entitled to interact. "The effect of the nTAGs is comparable to that of the invitation – they grant the guests a justification for initiating an encounter and provide a shield against rejection. In effect, the nTAG makes our mixer more like an exclusive gathering, such as a cocktail party, than a mixer with a low screen on invitees would typically be," they write. This points to the conclusion that efforts to make attendees feel part of an exclusive group with permission to interact will boost their encounters.

Finding #4: Are mixers worthwhile?

Are mixers worthwhile? The authors present a convincing argument that yes,

they are. And while the best way to max out meeting new people is to arrive without any old friends in tow, this is unlikely to happen. And, the authors conclude, it is unnecessary.

"[Mixers] also serve as rites of integration, reinforcing preexisting relationships by providing friends and acquaintances with another opportunity to encounter each other. Thus, mixers and other parties strengthen existing network ties within a university program, a corporation, or a community at the same time they allow the possibility of creating new ties," they write. These seem to be good reasons for continuing to offer mixers at your events. ■