

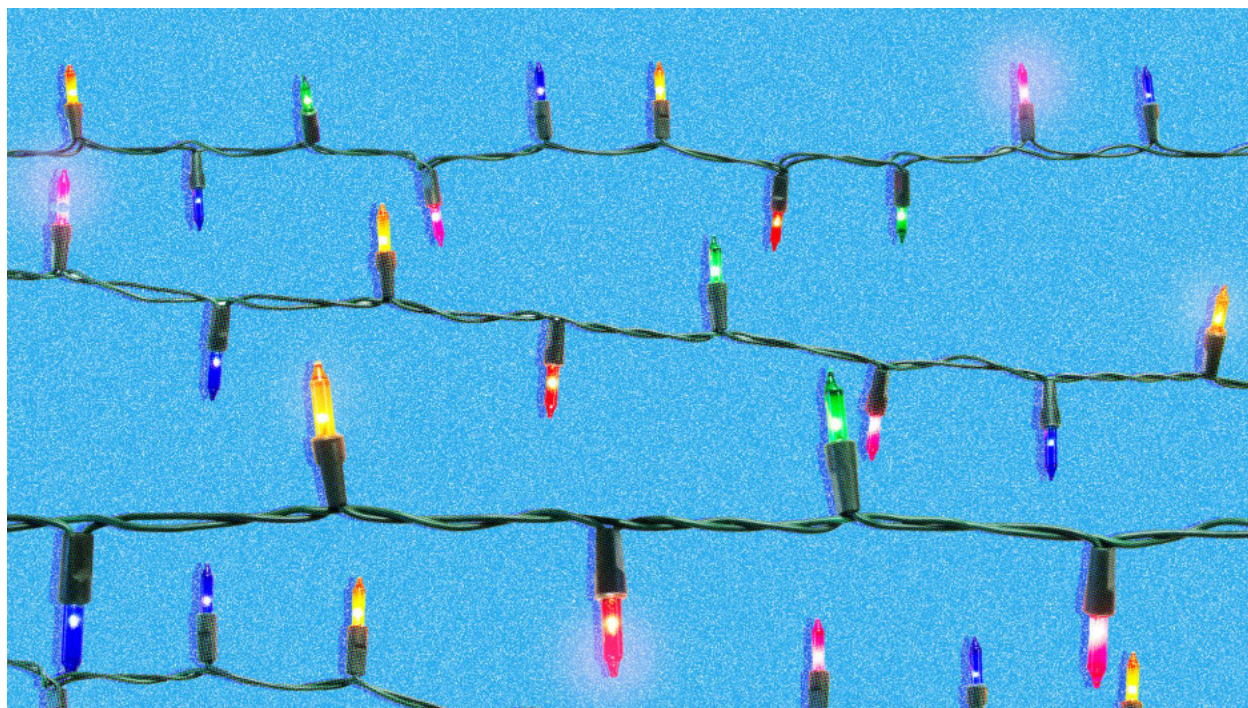
FAST COMPANY

6 ways to use the holidays for networking

You're going to be talking to a lot of people this season anyway, so you might as well get the most out of it.

By *STEPHANIE VOZZA*

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The holidays are the time for gatherings and good cheer, and that makes them a natural time for networking. Business is about relationships, and sharing kind wishes and getting some face time can help to strengthen them. Since the season is a busy one, make the most of your connections by creating a plan. Here are six ideas for effective holiday networking.

CHOOSE OPPORTUNITIES WISELY

Be smart about the ones you attend, says James Cassel, chairman of the independent investment banking firm Cassel Salpeter & Co.

“[Attend] as many relevant holiday events as possible,” he says. “Taking advantage of them requires being strategic, disciplined, and committed to follow-up. Think of yourself as a smart marathon runner, not a sprinter. That means doing serious research as you target gatherings that you think will draw the people you see as your best prospects.

“In a digital age in which we’re losing the human touch, there’s nothing finer than a handwritten note,” says Cassel. “I begin my follow-up within a day or two after meeting people, and I’m careful to include something specific and personal about the encounter, as well as verbiage that reminds the prospect what it is my company has to offer. Sounds simple, but you’d be surprised how many people fail to execute it completely.”

MAKE A LIST

Create a “meet list” of key individuals you’d like to connect with during the holidays and why, suggests corporate connections consultant Judy Robinett, author of *Crack the Funding Code*.

“Events can be jam-packed with opportunities,” she says. “Narrowing it down in order to ensure you’re being strategic, and maximizing the time you have with these key individuals, will help to ensure you’re making more lasting than fleeting connections.”

If you’re looking for conversations that can further your business, approach them with mentorship instead of profit in mind, she adds. “Mentors can be valuable players in your future success—and possible investors in the future—so building these early bonds can definitely pay off in the long run,” says Robinett.

HELP OTHERS NETWORK

It’s the season of giving, and being a connector is one of the most valuable things you can do for people in your network, says Kevin Hamilton, SVP of marketing at the restaurant technology platform Toast.

“The holidays are a great time of year to canvas your network and connect individuals that you think could be helpful to each other in the New Year,” he says. “This might include employees looking for a potential mentor, clients looking to break into a new region, or colleagues who want to acquire new

skills. Use your wide network for good, and connect people to one another in a way that's helpful, authentic, and meaningful."

CONNECT ON THE SPOT

With all the festivities and conversations people are having throughout holiday networking events, it can be hard to remember who's who, says Solomon Timothy, CEO of Digital Marketing Agency. Instead, keep your phone on hand and take advantage of LinkedIn.

"Download the app and keep it on your home screen so it's easy to access," he says. "Then, as you're meeting new folks, pull up the app and find them. This enables you to make that real-time connection and is an easy access point to avoid their crowded emails so that you're able to send a more personalized, direct message."

Added bonus: You might find out on the spot that you have mutual connections that can help continue to drive the conversation, Timothy says.

BE INCLUSIVE

Winter holidays of Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanza are often recognized, but the employees of cloud communications provider 8×8 use every holiday as a chance to connect with each other.

"We celebrate diversity and welcome all cultures," says CEO Vik Verma. "If you're smart and have good values, you're of great value to us. We like to create an environment that demystifies different ethnicities. We celebrate Christmas and Diwali. We feel like if our employees can be themselves without having to create some act and be somebody they're not, we create a safe environment."

Every Wednesday, 8×8 employees get a chance to relax, mingle, and enjoy a catered lunch. "My general philosophy is that people work hard," says Verma. "We try not to have evening parties that take them away from family. Why create an obligation to stay late for a beer bash? If we can gather at lunchtime, you're providing value to employees."

OR JUST WAIT UNTIL THE NEW YEAR

While the holidays are prime for networking, they're also hectic. If you're feeling overwhelmed, why not wait? asks Brian Rowe, CEO and founder of Perceivant, an educational technology company.

"December is such a busy and stressful time for everyone, so wait until the New Year to reconnect with current and new customers," he suggests.

"Thinking in this mind-set helps us kick off the year strong and connect with contacts straight away once January rolls around to stay more top-of-mind."

Rowe has the same philosophy with his employees. "There are enough holiday parties in December. So, to avoid any added stress, we all gather together as a company in mid-January to celebrate," he says. "This allows us to reconnect, discuss what happened in the previous year, and get excited about what's coming ahead."