Five Networking Tips for Wallflowers

Some people are naturally good at networking. You see these people at conferences: going around shaking hands, introducing themselves to anyone that will listen, handing out business cards, etc. All the while, you stand on the sidelines simply watching the action, feeling too shy or unimportant to do the same.

Some people aren’t natural networkers. You might be quite introverted or perhaps you have some deep misgivings about the concept of “networking” (maybe it seems fake to you, and you think it’ll mean “using” people). No matter, you can still keep up friendships and make new contacts – without having to resort to some the tactics some would call "sleazy marketing".

Here’s how:

1. **Be Yourself**  
   My first tip is to simply be yourself. I’m at my most comfortable when I’m being informal, and when I’m able to chat to people about things other than work! Don’t try to force yourself to network in a way that feels uncomfortable to you: if big corporate events seem insincere, avoid them. If all your colleagues are encouraging you to mass-email “useful contacts”, go for a personal and authentic approach that suits you, instead.

   In the long run, the people who you want to surround yourself with are people who like you for who you are, and who want to do business with the “real you”.

2. **Be A Good Friend**  
   Networking doesn’t have to be a cold, corporate activity. For me, good networking goes hand in hand with being a good friend. That means asking clients how they’re doing, and taking a genuine interest in their life and their concerns. People are much more likely to send repeat business to you if you’re their friend rather than just some random contact they once worked with.

   This doesn’t mean you should try to be falsely chummy with people: as with the first tip, you should just be yourself. If a friendship doesn’t seem to be developing naturally, just leave it and move on.

3. **Stay In Touch**  
   A large part of networking is simply letting people know what you’re up to. This could mean sending the occasional “newsletter” to old college friends; you never know who might be in need of your products or services. It also means taking the time to send out
cards or even holiday gifts to your clients. Don’t keep trying to expand your network whilst neglecting or forgetting about those already in it.

You might even want to reconnect with friends from high school: with Facebook and other social networking sites, it’s easy to search for long-lost buddies and get back in touch.

4. **Use Twitter**
   In my opinion, one of the best online networking tools is Twitter. It’s fun, geared towards informality and conversations, and isn’t intrusive like other forms of communication can be (phone calls, and even emails, can annoy people who feel they barely know you). If you’re a bit intimidated of getting in touch with someone in your field, try following them on Twitter first. This obviously works best for those involved in tech-savvy professions but it is really catching on in on in other areas as well.

When you update your own Twitter, keep in mind who from your network will be reading. Most people won’t want to know that “Bob is eating a sandwich”. Try to make your Twitters relevant to big happenings in your work and life. After you get started, this post will introduce you to some [advanced Twitter tools](http://www.dumblittleman.com/2008/01/five-networking-tips-for-wallflowers.html).

5. **Join A Club**
   Although it’s easy to have a negative view of business events that are geared to networking, a “club” doesn’t have to be something that’s just set up for people to push their wares at one another. Why not get together with colleagues in your industry on a regular basis, or even network through a hobby or passion that you have? If you’re in a sports club, for instance, let other members know what you do for a living – you never know what connections you might spark off.

   Studying an academic or vocational course related to your profession is also a great way to meet people who are passionate about the same sort of work as you: I’m studying a creative writing MA and relishing the opportunity to work alongside lots of fellow writers.