

Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

GROWING YOUR PROFESSIONAL NETWORK

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County Extension agents work extensively with groups of individuals, organizations and partners such as health councils, food policy groups, schools, worksites and other community agencies. These groups bring community partners together and provide opportunities for information, idea and resource sharing to address common goals and tackle local challenges. They also represent a crucial structure for policy, system and environment (PSE) change. A single organization cannot do this work alone. Agents may help to form such groups or inherit them from a predecessor; they can also be members of existing community groups through invitation or by volunteering their time. Meeting new people and either forming or assimilating into a new group can be daunting; however, research has shown that educators who are more active within their community networks are more likely to use PSE strategies. The purpose of this factsheet is to increase readers' self-efficacy in growing their professional network by developing valuable partnerships to support PSE efforts.

Focus your purpose

While it could be tempting to attend all networking opportunities to which you are invited, Extension work does not usually provide time to attend everything. It is important to focus on your purpose and prioritize partnerships and group meetings that share similar goals. To define your goals and gain the best understanding of the needs of your community, start by describing your community and homing in on the needs that you can address.

Here are some steps to start networking with a purpose:

- Make a list of community partners and organizations in your area that share similar goals and objectives. Refer to the list regularly and add to it as needed.
- Research events that you plan to attend. Consider the purpose. What other organizations could be there? Who are the speakers? Is this for the public, a group of professionals with whom you need to connect or a group that is otherwise important to Extension? Set a goal to make one or two connections. Also, plan how you will reconnect with them after the event. Will you send an email, give them a call or reconnect over Zoom or a professional networking site (such as LinkedIn)? Once you have met your connection goal, you are free to go or stay and enjoy meeting others.
- Perfect your elevator speech. Be able to explain Extension and your role in today's Extension. Also, be prepared to speak about the resources you bring to the table. As an Extension professional, you offer much more than research-based education, you also have unique partnership connections and knowledge about the community where you work, and the needs related to your purpose.

Build trust

Extension is in the business to provide people with research-based information. But it is also a people business. Theodore Roosevelt said, “People don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.” Authentically showing care also opens the door to highly effective professional relationships.

- Be authentic. In this case, being authentic is being true to yourself without putting on a front to fit in with a group of people.
- Smile. Friendly faces are inviting.
- Use peoples’ names from the start of a conversation. This helps you remember their names and make them feel more connected with you.
- Make eye contact. There is no need to hold eye contact throughout a conversation but meet your peer’s eyes to show that you are listening.
- Listen actively. Listen to hear and understand what the other person is saying, not to think ahead to what you will say next. People remember those who pay attention to what they are saying. If you are naturally shy or feeling uncertain in the situation, this plays into your strengths.

Easing the pressure

Individuals who are introverted, are new to Extension work or lack contacts can use one or more of these tactics to make mixing and mingling more comfortable.

- Volunteer to assist. This action instantly gives you something to talk about with the other helpers. It also helps make a good first impression.
- When entering a room of strangers, ease yourself up to a group and listen to the conversation. Do not feel a need to say anything. When there is a lull in the conversation, ask a question.
- Get in line — at the door, at the buffet or at the restroom. Especially if you are nervous, lines are a place where you can strike up a quick conversation. This is where the elevator speech can come in handy.
- Consider conversation starters. Something like “Isn’t this a beautiful day?” is a simple icebreaker to get started. However, being prepared to discuss something about the event or how they learned about the event can start a more substantial conversation.
- Two tips: 1) Practice a firm handshake. It makes a good impression. 2) Have business cards readily available.

Follow-up

Attending networking opportunities and group meetings is just the start. Follow through on your plan to reconnect through email, phone call or networking site.

- When sending an email, use an official Extension signature. Including an Extension website link allows the contact to learn more about you and our organization.
- Find a polite way to set a response expectation, such as “I am working on a project that is due next Friday. If you could give me some insight by then, it would be most appreciated.”
- If you do not get a response by your time limit, send a short reminder early on the day you mentioned. Something like “Did you get a chance to think about this?” is a soft nudge for a response.

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- Sometimes your follow through attempt is rejected. Do not take this personally. This is part of the process. Remember that people are busy, and this might not be a suitable time to make a connection. Be open to future opportunities.
- Remember that quality relationships are more effective than a volume of highly superficial ones.

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