

FOCUS on Students: Networking for the non-Networker

By Robert W. Vallin

What comes to mind when you think of the phrase ‘working the room?’ Maybe you just think, ‘That’s not something I could do.’ For me, it brings to mind Eric Stratton (played by Tim Matheson), a character in the classic movie *National Lampoon’s Animal House*. There is a pledge party in full swing, but Stratton, president of Delta House, wants to skip out for a date. Walking through the crowded room, he shakes every hand he finds on the way out each time stating, ‘Eric Stratton, damned glad to meet you,’ with absolutely zero sincerity.

This is networking, but it’s really bad networking. To network is not to meet everyone as superficially as possible, nor is it a game of gathering more names and email addresses than anyone else, nor is it to exhaust yourself doing something which makes you horribly uncomfortable. So what is networking? The *Oxford English Dictionary* reads, ‘network/nétwerk (n. & v.) group of people who exchange information, contacts, and experience for professional or social purposes.’ Is this helpful? Not really. So we’ll just say this: networking is mostly doing the things you’d do anyway, but in such a way as to help you know more people whom you can help and who can help you.

Networking is a very funny thing. In a survey given to students at the Joint Mathematics Meeting in 2007, 65.7% of undergraduates rated networking *very important* or *important*, while 80.8% of graduate students ranked networking in those categories. However, almost half of the undergraduates rated the social events as *somewhat important* or *unimportant* and over half felt that way about the Student Hospitality Center. Almost

This is the fourth in a series of short articles for students. The overall title for the series is **FOCUS on Students**. Some of these articles will be for undergraduates, others for graduate students, and many for all students. These articles will also be posted in the Student section of the MAA web site.



Illustration by Brad Fitzpatrick

60% of the graduate students echoed the feelings of the undergraduates on social events, the Student Hospitality Center, and SIGMAAs (Special Interest Groups within the MAA). In other words, they say networking is important, but feel that these events — where they could be doing it — are unimportant.

Why does networking get such a bad rap? Probably because of the dread that fills the body of the networker as he/she enters the room. The sweaty palms, nervous stomach, feeling of having nothing to add to the conversation, and idea that somewhere there is something more important to be doing are all symptoms of this dread. That’s why we want to talk about how to network so you can realize successful communicating is within your grasp.

First off, where do you network? Meetings are a great place. That’s pretty obvious. Another place, quickly gaining on first place, is on the Internet. Most students already do some form of social networking by having an account on Facebook or MySpace. Not only can you do social things there, but professional as well. Check out the MAA’s Facebook group at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=5110769515>.

As for ‘professional’ networking sites, the premiere one is LinkedIn. Created in 2001, LinkedIn, at <http://www.linkedin.com>, has over 12 million users. It’s a free service; you just have to fill out an online profile. This is perfect for the nervous networker, you can ‘work the room’ at your own pace and communing on the Internet does not have the negative stereotype of chit-chat with people you don’t really know. Some other online places to look include the alumni sites for your schools, professional association web pages, resource sites (e.g. directories of people of the profession), and bulletin boards where you can post questions and comments. Remember when emailing or communicating online you need to make a good impression. Be clear, concise, honest, and courteous. Don’t use slang or even worse, text language; ‘plsd 2 meet u,’ gets you nothing.

Suppose you are at the Joint Meetings. You want to go to the First Timer’s Reception, but don’t know how to mingle. Let’s go over some rules. To begin with, building a network takes time. You will not leave the room with a network in place. That is okay. Also, there is no recipe for success, this is not one size (or one rule) fits all.

Say your name clearly. Smile.

Make sure you have a good handshake — firm grip, eye contact, right duration.

It’s not just for you, think of what you can do for others.

Listen. Listen for real, it’s not just nod your head time.

Ask people about themselves. Then let them answer.

Be prepared to talk about yourself. Introverts find this difficult, so have something already in mind. You can even practice what you want to say. (See the discussion

of the elevator talk below.)

If you connect well with someone, get an email address. Then, within 24 hours of getting home, email the person reiterating how nice it was to meet.

Don't stay too long in one spot, but stay long enough to make a good impression. Don't be an Eric Stratton.

You don't have to go it alone. If you want, bring a friend, but just remember, you are not there to talk with your friend, but to meet others.

Now, on to the elevator talk. A lesson from Business School, the premise is simple. You have a project that you think is dynamite. One morning you find yourself riding up in the elevator with the company CEO. During that 30-second ride you have the undivided attention of the boss of bosses. What will you say, in that time, to convince the CEO to approve your project? That's exactly what you want to do when you meet someone except what you're selling is yourself. The elevator talk is not some over the top 'Look at ME!' rehearsed speech, but instead something that will tell the people around you that you're an interesting person. Talk about where you are in school and what subjects you really like. If you are giving a talk or presenting a poster, tell that. This can be difficult for introverts, who like to talk about ideas rather than themselves, but it is necessary.

Some last tips for the reticent. Join a group and participate. Although it can be tough to be active in professional organizations there are ways to be successful. Like learning a foreign language, the key is immersion. If you can help out in some position in the group, then you get to learn about the organization from the inside. Then people will be seeking you out. Also, if there is an event, go early, if possible, even volunteer to help set up. This helps because if you are among the first to arrive the crowd will be small and not so intimidating. Set an achievable goal; e.g. by the end of this meeting I will know five new people having chatted with each for at least 5 minutes and leaving them with my card. Lastly, networking does not just happen



DIRECTOR OF FIRST YEAR MATHEMATICS

Arizona State University announces a national search to recruit a Director for its First Year Mathematics (FYM) Program. The Director of FYM will be responsible for all aspects of the FYM program, including leading the creation and delivery of innovative curricula, hiring and evaluating teachers, and overseeing a highly effective and qualified staff. The Director may also engage in an active personal research program. The successful candidate may hold an academic appointment at the rank of associate or full professor or a senior administrative appointment as appropriate.

Candidates must have an earned doctorate in mathematics education, statistics, or mathematics and a commitment to and strong interest in fostering student success in mathematics at the first- and second-year levels. Desirable qualifications include documented leadership skills, previous administrative experience, a history and awareness of external funding for educational projects, experience with program development in education, evidence of excellent communication and organizational skills, and a commitment to working with and supporting a diverse student and faculty population.

The position is available beginning 1 July 2008. Salary and start-up funding will be competitive and commensurate with qualifications. Review of applications will begin on 4 January 2008; if not filled, applications will be evaluated every two weeks thereafter until the search is closed. Applicants must submit electronically (in MS Word or PDF format) a cover letter, current curriculum vitae, and names and contact information (phone and e-mail) for three references to Mr. Gabriel Escontrias (Gabriel.Escontrias@asu.edu). Inquiries and nominations should be directed to: Sid P. Bacon, Dean of Natural Sciences, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Arizona State University, PO Box 876505, Tempe, AZ 85287-6505; or email: spb@asu.edu. A background check is required for employment. Arizona State University is an affirmative action, equal opportunity employer committed to excellence through diversity.

Arizona State University (see <http://www.asu.edu>) is a dynamic, internationally recognized research university serving more than 60,000 students in the Phoenix metropolitan area, one of the fastest growing urban centers in the nation. The FYM Program (see <http://math.asu.edu/fym>) currently has more than 50 lecturers and instructors teaching FYM courses defined as College Algebra, Finite Mathematics, College Mathematics, Theory of Elementary Mathematics, Elementary Statistics, Pre-Calculus, and several sequences of Calculus.

at official events. Talk to people. People you meet on airplanes, people waiting in line with you, the guy in the seat next to you at the game, just talk with them. You may be surprised where it leads.

Robert W. Vallin is the MAA Associate Director for Student Programs. He welcomes questions and comments by email at rvallin@maa.org.

Correction

At the August meeting of the Board of Governors only Mary Sheppard was elected to the Audit Committee. We apologize for the incorrect information in the October issue of MAA FOCUS.