PROFESSIONAL NETWORKING EVENT BEST PRACTICES

Purpose:

A professional networking event is meant to engage local Virginia Tech alumni by providing the opportunity to broaden contacts with Hokies in the area and the ability to network with local professionals in a variety of career fields while learning about their local alumni chapter's events and initiatives.

Things to Consider:

Chapter Demographics

- Determine a central location to alumni in the area. Consider areas with large concentrations of businesses or industries with a lot of alumni.

Think Local

- Capitalize on local attractions
- Consider local industries that could provide resources or interest alumni
- Identify local alumni with unique experiences or skills that may be willing to share

Timing

- Hold networking events during the week, before or after work hours
- Avoid having a large number of events competing with your networking event
- Consider weather, vacation months, holidays, etc. that might affect the turnout of local professionals

Budget

- Is there a budget? Where should the budget be spent (e.g. venue, food and beverage, etc.)?
- Where can efforts be supplemented by volunteer help, sponsorships, or leveraging existing relationships?
- Suggest providing lite appetizers/snacks and non-alcoholic drinks to attendees
- Determine if a small fee needs to be passed along to attendees to cover any costs. Try to keep fees to a minimum.
- Avoid using a professional networking event as the main fundraiser for a chapter scholarship

Keys to Success:

Venue

- Consider locations that can provide private or semi-private space and know how many people it can hold.
- Ability to order or bring in your own food and drinks
- Places to consider:
  - Company or business office
  - Restaurant or bar
  - Think outside-the-box (e.g. community center, government buildings, recreational spaces, etc.)
- Is the venue easy to find? Will signs or directions need to be provided?
- Can everyone hear the program?

NOTE: If you can help it, avoid choosing a bar and setting-up in the main area, open to the general public. This can detract from people making connections and wanting to attend future events.

Liaison

- Include your chapter liaison in your planning as soon as possible
- Liaisons can provide suggestions, timelines, and other feedback and ideas

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Keys to Success, *continued:*

Format

There are multiple networking formats you can choose to implement for your event. Each has its own structure and set-up requirements. There are always people around to learn from. Choose a topic, industry, or "how to" network topic as the basis of your event.

- **Speaker(s):** You can choose to invite speakers based on industry affiliations or experts around a particular topic. Speakers should be given a specific set of talking points or guidelines to help them plan remarks accordingly. This becomes more important when you have multiple speakers and want to create a cohesive presentation.

- **Roundtable Discussions:** You can create smaller group led discussions on topics through roundtable discussions. This format requires "table hosts" to help direct the discussion and pose questions. You can choose to either let attendee's self-select their topics of interest or to randomly assign topics to individuals. This format is perfect for in depth reviews on topics or areas of interest, or to help create deeper connections between attendees.

- **Café Corners:** This is similar to roundtable discussions but different in the fact that your "topic host" is really a subject matter expert who is sharing information about research, best practices, etc. The group is more of an audience that is able to ask questions of the topic host. These interactions are meant to be shorter in nature, about 8-10 minutes of content, before attendees are encouraged to "swap" and move onto another topic.

- **Speed Networking:** Speed networking is a meeting format designed to accelerate business contacts. Speed networking is a structured process for facilitating introductions and conversation between people who don't know each other. Participants greet each other in a series of brief exchanges during a set period of time. You can set-up tables to move between or simply have attendees pair up and move in one direction around the room until they have meet with everyone (or a specific number based on your total attendees).

- **Panel Discussion:** Similar to inviting speakers, you can also choose to have a panel of speakers talk on a given topic. You should have a moderator who's responsible for guiding the conversations and asking panelist questions. Identify between 2-5 panelists to participate. You should have pre-set questions or topics for discussion that should be shared with the panelists ahead of time (at least topics).

Must-Haves

- Name-tags (e.g. sticky ones that people can fill in themselves)
- Pens and markers
- Event registration (i.e. to connect or follow-up with individuals before and after the event)

Marketing

- It's not an event if no one knows about it
- Utilize VTAA postcards and emails
- Send additional emails and mailings through local lists
- Leverage all social media accounts
- Work with your liaison to create a communications timeline to ensure timely messaging to key audiences effectively

Registration

- Utilize Eventbrite in Alumni Spaces to track event RSVPs or registrations and take payments (if applicable)
- Set up a table to track walk-up registrations and day of cash donations

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Keys to Success, *continued:*

Post-event Recap

- Regroup and reassess within a week of the event
- What went well? What didn't?
- What can be changed for next year?
- Send out an email to all attendees after the event thanking them for their time and include recommendations for other networking opportunities . Suggested items to include:

    - VTAA central events—https://www.alumni.vt.edu/events.html

    - VTAA networking events—https://www.alumni.vt.edu/events/networking.html

    - Hokie Mentorship Connect - https://www.alumni.vt.edu/careers/alumni-mentoring.html

    - Alumni Job Posting Board—https://alumni-jobs.apps.hr.vt.edu/

    - VTAA LinkedIn Groups—https://www.linkedin.com/groups/69020/ and https://www.linkedin.com/school/virginia-tech/people/

- Use Alumni Spaces to report attendance, share registration lists, add notes for next year, etc.

- Check-in with your liaison for any additional post –event considerations (e.g. share donors and donation amounts or other items)

Additional Tips:

- A few days before the event, send an email out to current registrants with the following:

    - Reminder of date, time, and location with any special instructions for parking or accessing the area

    - Reminder to bring business cards

    - Share any event or networking protocols, tips, and tricks (i.e. no selling, follow-up with connections, etc.)

- Designate an emcee for the event who will welcome everyone, guide attendees through the format, highlight protocols tips, and expectations, make introductions of speakers or special guests (as needed), keep the event on schedule, and share closing remarks , upcoming events or initiatives, and thank everyone.

- If you are interested in hosting networking events on a regular basis (e.g. monthly, every other month ,or quarterly)

    - Don't get discouraged! It may take time to build up attendance and word of mouth marketing.

    - Be consistent in the timing and marketing of these events (i.e. first Wednesday of every month, first Wednesday of every even month, first Wednesday of the first month of the quarter, etc.) .

    - Be prepared to have attendance vary from event to event. Hosting the events on a consistent timeframe will do more for long –term participation.

    - Consider having a separate list of alumni contact information for networking events