

A Wallflower Guide to Networking

By Fleur Bradley

At a fan conference a few years ago, I met this writer. He walked up to me with a friendly smile, told me about his book (which sounded very interesting), and how he was up for an award. He handed me a promotional bookmark, and moved on to the next person. It was flawless networking.

I'm not that person. I couldn't sell water in the middle of a desert (I would probably give it away, since everyone looked so thirsty). And the thought of having to walk up to strangers someday and talk about my book—I have to be honest: it terrifies me.

But at this same conference, I met other authors. Ones who don't come right out of the gate with a sales pitch, but just...talk to you. They're friendly, smart, interesting, and most of all, they're passionate about their books. Without a sales pitch, these authors had me standing in line at their book signings.

This experience taught me that every author is different. Not everyone can wear buttons with their book on it, or hand out bookmarks with ease. Some of us (like me) don't have that natural sales ability. I would be miserable if I tried to act otherwise. I also learned that I don't have to. At the conference, I was surprised to find how many people already knew me and had read my published short stories. I was flattered. I had joined online mystery writers groups, gotten short stories published, and made a lot of friends, slowly, along the way. I had networked, and I wasn't even trying.

Here are some easy ways to network, for my fellow wallflowers:

Join a Group

If you're reading the NewsMag, you likely belong to Pikes Peak Writers already, which is a great start. But are you going to the Write Brain sessions, or the member nights? Make sure you know all the benefits each group has before joining, and make the most of them. The Write Brain sessions are free, and they're a great way to meet other members and learn something new at the same time (plus, the snacks are to die for). For online groups, check around (your genre's organization, like RWA, is a great place to start), join their loop, and lurk awhile to see what people are like.

Volunteer

I know, I know, it's the V word. But the great thing about volunteering is that you get to contribute (everyone will love you for it), get to know tons of people, and have a great sense of accomplishment in the end. I volunteered during Left Coast Crime in Denver last year, and met lots of (famous) authors. Before you volunteer, make sure it's for a task you can manage, and one you'll enjoy. Nobody likes a cranky volunteer.

Write

"I am writing already," you say. Try your hand at an article or an interview. The NewsMag is always looking for contributors—not only are you contributing to PPW, but you'll walk away with a publishing credit for your resume or query letter. I was amazed when I won the Reporter of the Year award this year; I had just been having fun, writing articles, and meeting authors for interviews. You already love to write, so why not use it to network at the same time? Check around within your genre, too. Sisters in Crime and RWA have many chapters with newsletters that need to be filled. There's usually no pay, but the rewards are priceless.

Try on Some Shorts

No worries, you don't need to go to the gym to tone your legs; I'm talking short stories here. Sure, that novel project is important, but short story writing comes with significant benefits. The time investment is smaller, you can send out your own work (no agent required), and you might even get paid. Short story writing is also a great way to experiment with different genres and get some experience working with editors and writing cover letters. Check www.duotrope.com for markets.

Get Online

When I first started writing, I lived in the middle of nowhere, with no PPW or other writers' group nearby. I had to find other writers online—and I'm so glad I did. I now have writer friends across the globe, people I have been lucky enough to meet at a few conferences, people I consider good friends. And although I didn't befriend these writers with networking in mind, these contacts have led to anthology invitations, blogging invites, and freelance work. Don't be afraid to branch out beyond your geographical area. With the abundance of ways to meet people online (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), you can meet without even leaving the comfort of your home. Just make sure you proceed with caution when going online, to protect against the creepy few who are not who they say they are.

Be Nice

I know, you're nice already. But at the last Pikes Peak Writers Conference, did you make an effort to meet other writers? Sure, networking with agents and editors is exciting, but it's just as important to meet your fellow writer-in-the-trenches. Next time you're at an event (because you're inspired to go now, right?), walk up to a fellow attendee and introduce yourself. Ask the person: What are you working on? I promise you'll have plenty to talk about. Don't forget that today's budding writer could very well be next year's hot ticket.

Remember: networking doesn't have to feel like networking. Meet new people, volunteer, write an article or two, and make a few friends while you're at it. Just get out there. By the time your first novel is released, you'll have a whole army of supporters, ready to toot your horn. I can hear the noise already, can't you?

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