

# The real business of parties

By Melinda Ham | [smh.com.au](http://smh.com.au) | 22 November

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Networking the office Christmas party was a ticket to promotion for Julia Palmer. While working in Sweden for a global events and conferencing company, she attended the firm's London Christmas celebration and started chatting with the general manager.

By chance, he was transferred six months later to Stockholm to be the then 25-year-old Palmer's boss.

"Because we had met socially those months before, we already had a connection," she says.

"Soon afterwards, he recommended me highly and put me forward to be the general manager in Singapore."

Astute businesspeople like Palmer are realising that Christmas parties are not just events at which to get drunk and end up in embarrassing situations with co-workers. Instead they provide excellent networking opportunities. By building rapport and relationships with fellow employees, management and clients you could be doing yourself a terrific favour down the track. Palmer is now the managing director of her own B2B consulting company, BConsulted. "Meeting people through these events is priceless; it's so powerful and shouldn't be underestimated," she says.

Based on her experience working at the NSW Chamber of Commerce and then in London, Singapore and Sweden, Palmer says if you work for a big organisation you should use Christmas office events to talk to people you don't have contact with every day.

"Take the opportunity to talk to the most senior person you can," she says. "Don't be intimidated and think: 'Oh my God - I'm talking to the CEO.' It's a social setting and at the end of the day the CEO is just another person and you just want to leave a lasting positive impression."

All corporate Christmas parties have slightly different guest lists. Some invite only their staff, some their employees' spouses as well and some their clients and suppliers. Any of these people can be interesting and worthwhile to speak with.

One of the keys to the success of these functions is to be yourself and behave sensitively to other people, says Tania Sernia, the Melbourne-based Asia-Pacific marketing manager for Seamless CMS, a software company.

"Don't put on a show to impress people. If you're genuine and sincere, people will want to chat and be interested in who you are and what you do," she says. A main part of this rapport- building actually is asking questions, listening and taking an interest in what the other person is saying.

Simultaneously, though, Palmer says she often volunteers some detail about her own life first, such as her next holiday destination, to try to encourage the person to follow suit instead of prying into their personal life.

While you may have your own private agenda about the people you want to rub shoulders with, Sernia suggests you should beware of becoming "a networking snob".

"Not only is it rude and bad business karma but everyone knows someone and you may never find out that the PA for Company X who you've just snubbed is best mates with the CEO of your biggest prospect," she says. Sandra Chiles, the managing director of inPlace Recruitment, a boutique tourism and hospitality recruiter, says that if clients or other industry players are at the party, it also could be a perfect opportunity to do some discreet research.

"You don't have to speak to the boss," she says.

"You can find out a lot about another company by talking to the staff who work there and if it's a place that could suit you."

Tess Sanders-Lazarus, the managing director of Invigorate, a national brand management company based in Brisbane, says business, contracts and promotions are definitely off the conversation agenda at office Christmas parties. It's not the time to make a hard sell.

"It is a chance to have a meaningful social encounter, to get on really well with someone and find some mutual common interests. Also be the facilitator, introduce people who don't know each other to each other."

It's also amazing, she says, how people are remembered for breaking basic social rules and shunning etiquette, such as double dipping in the food, not eating or drinking politely or saying something stupid or inconsiderate. But if you think you have established rapport, follow it up, Chiles says.

"Most people prefer to work with someone they like and trust, so if you can remember some of their personal details then ask about them the next time you see them. Relate to someone and show empathy."

Also, follow up on your Christmas party promises. Within a few days send an email or note. Follow through on contributions you've offered, such as: "Here's the link I was talking about."

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