

Be Inclusive: “Croissants vs. Bagels”

by Robbie Samuels, Professional Speaker | Author | Podcast Host | Coach

We have all seen those tight networking circles, when everyone else in the room seems like they are engrossed in a group conversation, and you are the one left out. On an individual level, you can begin to shift the culture of an event by being intentionally open in your body language.

Meeting professionals and event organizers can use this information to train their long-time participants, volunteers, board members, and staff—and everyone will feel the improved ease of moving in and out of conversations.

I’ve included diagrams to help you improve your stance, so you will become easier to approach and will be less likely to be stuck in a conversation.

This is an excerpt from “Croissants vs. Bagels: Strategic, Effective, and Inclusive Networking at Conferences.” The context is a conference, but this can easily apply to any networking social you attend.

Why Croissants vs. Bagels?

Bagels

Quite a bit of the conference takes place outside of breakout sessions, so you’ll need to know how to navigate the vibrant chaos of the hallway and crowded receptions. I’ve been leading sessions on networking for nearly a decade, and what I’m about to share is by far my most memorable takeaway, and thus the title of this book. It’s about body language and what you can do to help make the conference a more welcoming and inclusive space.

Picture this: on the first day of the conference, there is a thirty-minute block on the schedule for networking. You gamely head into the hallway, grab a cup of coffee, and begin to circle the space looking for an opening for your first conversation. You are not having a lot of success because everyone around you is in tight networking circles. These shoulder-to-shoulder huddles are the “bagels”—they are round and it is nearly impossible to break into them.

If you are like most people, you’ll be looking for an easy opening. Not seeing one, you might circle the room and then head to your next breakout session early. If you do this, you will be missing out on all of the possible connections happening in the hallway between sessions.

Wallflowers

If it feels too early to go to the next breakout session, you might be drawn to the person standing alone against the wall. If this is your first time at this conference, I wouldn’t suggest talking to wallflowers. Even if it is a great conversation, the ending is going to be very awkward. Neither of you knows other people at the event, so you can’t make introductions. Your best bet is to engage with attendees chatting in small groups.

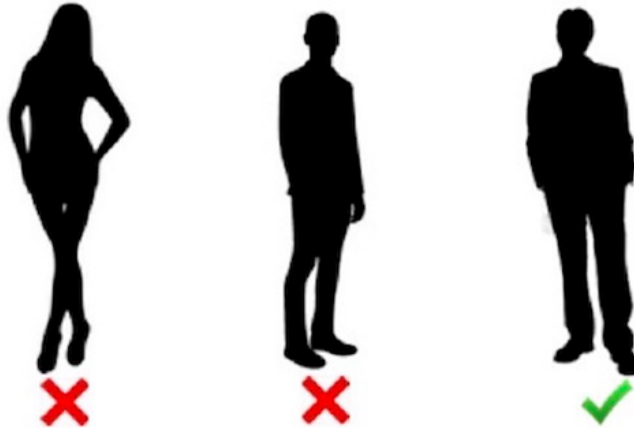
Croissants

Now imagine you're one of the people standing in a typical networking "bagel." If you took a small step back with one foot and turned your torso slightly, you'd create an opening, which would make it easier for someone to join your group. That is the "croissant"—the opening to help someone join the conversation.

Why Would You Want to Be Easy to Approach?

You are at this conference to meet people, right? Or else you could have stayed home and just purchased an online course to learn the same material.

How Do You Stand So You're Easy to Approach?



Some people stand with their feet crossed. To move in any direction, they would first need to untangle their feet, step in one direction, and then start moving. This stance doesn't make you approachable, and you may find it's harder to move in and out of group conversations.

Others stand with their feet shoulder width apart. If you are talking to only one other person and want others to join your conversation, this stance isn't very welcoming.

Closed or Open Body Language?

There are times when you don't want anyone to interrupt your conversation. Perhaps you finally got some face time with a key influencer in your field and you know others are circling to jump in at the first opportunity to do so. In those moments, your body language should be closed. However, those moments of having closed body language should not be your default.

Align your body language with your intentions.

We've established you are at the conference to meet people. So make sure you are easy to approach. Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, one leg back a bit, with your weight on the back leg, torso turned slightly toward whichever foot is in the back. Now you are approachable and can easily invite anyone passing by to join in the conversation.

“Everyone Was So Friendly!”

This simple physical act is one of the best ways to navigate an event and create a welcoming community space. I’ve found only a small percentage of participants need to be practicing this and the effect will begin to be felt by everyone. They’ll leave wondering why this event felt so friendly and welcoming.

Bagels with Lox

But let’s say you’re approaching a “bagel” and no one in the circle seems to have a clue you are there and trying to join the conversation. What do you do? Try to get the attention of just one of the people in the group and step into the circle next to them. If you’re an outgoing extrovert, you might be inclined to take over a conversation—don’t.

Just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.

Scan for Croissants

You don’t have to start by breaking into these tight networking huddles. When you first get to the networking space, look around the room, check how everyone is standing, and see if you can spot someone with a more open stance. Just focus on one of the people in the circle, and as the group conversation continues, begin a side conversation with the person who made space for you. And of course, use your own body language to welcome others into your new conversation.

Be Welcoming

If you are in one of those tight networking circles and you see someone hovering nearby, turn to create space for them to join you. If someone approaches your “croissant” and seems hesitant, wave them in. When there is a pause in the conversation, let the newcomer know what you are discussing. “Bob was just telling us about his trip to Alaska.” This gracious gesture allows the newcomer to listen politely and then ask relevant questions.

What Exactly Is the Stance?



Start with your feet shoulder-width apart, then move one foot half a step back and put your weight on your back leg. Turn your back leg slightly—either toward two o’clock or ten o’clock. It is not an overly exaggerated or wide stance, just a subtle shift in your body language. This will have a profound impact on how easily people approach you and your ability to navigate the room.

Share this tip so you and your colleagues can remind each other to “stop bageling.” It’s a sticky concept—kind of like croissants and jam.

About Robbie Samuels

Prior to becoming recognized as a “networking expert” by *Inc.* and *Lifehacker*, and author of the best-selling business book *Croissants vs. Bagels: Strategic, Effective, and Inclusive Networking at Conferences* (available at www.CroissantsvsBagels.com) – Robbie was the Senior Manager of Events and Donor Engagement at a nonprofit in Boston for nearly a decade. Through this role, he oversaw 25 fundraising events a year that raised nearly \$1million annually.

Robbie believes networking is a marketing strategy and as a professional member of the National Speakers Association, has been speaking on the topic of inclusive and engaging connections for over a decade. He works with meeting professionals and conference organizers to design experiences that engage all participants, especially first-timers and those attending solo. Learn more about Art of the Schmooze, his signature talk, at www.ArtoftheSchmooze.com.

As a consultant, coach, author, and speaker he shares how to shift your mindset around relationship building, so you discover new connections and business opportunities in the world around you – and know how to act on them.

Listen to On the Schmooze podcast for more networking tips from Robbie and interviews with talented leaders: www.OntheSchmooze.com. Learn more about Robbie and his work at www.RobbieSamuels.com.

Want content you can share with your event participants? Download “Ten Tips for Conference Connections” at www.RobbieSamuels.com/MPI.