

GET CONNECTED! (The Myth of the “In” Crowd)

By: Joe Mirly

I certainly had some preconceived notions attending my first national NSA conference last year in Nashville. My first exposure to the “in” crowd was down in the hotel lounge the night before the conference was to begin. I didn’t belong. Everybody knew each other, and I knew nobody.

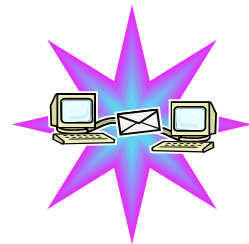
Sound familiar? I’m certain that other people have had similar feelings when attending NSA functions. For some there is a perception that there is an “in” crowd within the organization, and that to really have your voice heard and be appreciated you must somehow figure out a way to break into this select group of people. You need to learn the secret handshake or find out what the password is to get past the watcher at the door. What is the right of passage? What secret ceremony did you have to endure to become one of the privileged? Well I’ll tell you what I think it is, that mysterious method for inclusion... but you better keep it a secret as we don’t want the word getting out. OK? Are you ready?



The secret is – say “hello”! Or “howdy”! Or “good morning”! Say it with a smile on your face. Say hello to the people who attend the conference. The reason why everybody in the “in” crowd seems to know everybody else is because they talk to each other. Meeting people is one of the most wonderful things that happen at the NSA conferences! The more you *GET* involved the more you *FEEL* involved, and the more you *ARE* involved. Make sense? I’ll let you in on another secret, nobody at the conference knows everybody, but here are a couple of ways you can meet some people even before the conference.

A few months prior to attending the Nashville conference I had signed onto the STUTT-L list serve (if interested in joining, please contact Russ Hicks: russhicks@mail.com). There are other list serves out there, but this is the one that I joined. I started to recognize names of some of the people who posted to the list, names that I’d also read in Letting GO. I’d never met these people, but I knew a little about each of them from their opinions that appeared in my e-mail Inbox every so often. The more I started to dig around the wealth of resources on the Internet concerning stuttering, the more names I started to recognize. Hmm, I wondered if I would meet any of these people at the conference. They sure seem to know their way around.

Get involved with the discussions that happen on the list serves, or in stuttering chat rooms, submit articles for release in Letting GO, read something good and/or insightful in Letting GO - contact the author and tell them what you thought. You’ll never get your voice heard unless you actually say something. People who stutter can be many wonderful things, but not many are proficient mind-readers. E-mail and list serves are a wonderful first-step method for getting your voice heard and meeting people. You don’t have to actually speak, yet you can write volumes about your opinions and insights.

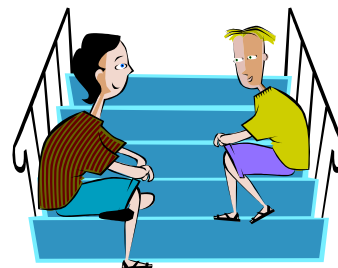


Another great way to get into the “in” crowd is to become involved in your local chapter. Become a leader. If you aren’t quite ready to become the leader, then participate in other ways. Volunteer to write the chapter’s newsletter, or organize some of the social events. Contact other chapters across the U.S. and start discussions. The contact information for most, if not all of the NSA chapters can be found on the NSA’s Web site. Use it, it is there for you!

Before you know it you'll know *TONS* of people, and they'll know you. Then, when you go to the conference, you can say "Hello!" and you'll be surprised at how many people you'll meet.

Ok, so you're at the conference and you still don't feel like you belong. Well I hate to break this to you, but you have to actually *try* before anything will happen. I know it can be difficult at first, introducing yourself can be a difficult and daunting task. But like many things, it gets easier with practice. And think about it, what could be a better environment for meeting new people and practicing your introductions than an NSA conference? Everybody already knows you stutter, or at least assumes you do. And the best part is **THEY STUTTER TOO!** They know what it's like; they know the dread that often accompanies introducing yourself. They "get it".

So now that you've met a few people, the next step to feeling connected is to actually *talk* to the people you meet. Saying "hello" is the important first step, but if you walk away now you'll never get anywhere. There are some great ice-breakers if you need a start. Ask if this is their first conference. Ask if they've been to any great workshops. Ask if they've found a good restaurant to eat at. Ask what chapter they are from. Ask anything, the important thing is to keep talking. I'll tell you another secret – they might be just as nervous meeting people as you are!



There are other ways to get the conversational ball rolling without introducing yourself to random people. Go to the workshops and participate. Ask questions. If not during the workshop then go up to the facilitator afterwards and tell him or her what you thought of it. You'll be glad you did.

Next step. There are always groups of people standing around the hotel lobby when it gets to be dinner time. People are forming groups to go out and socialize. You know what? Go up to someone in one of the groups and say "mind if I tag along?" You've got better than a 99.9% chance that the answer will be "Certainly! We'd love to have you along!"



If you are following along correctly you should start to see a pattern emerging here. To feel like you belong to the group you have to reach out. Additionally, when people reach out to you, as inevitably happens at NSA conferences, take the opportunity to communicate. You never know what might happen, you might just make another friend or meet a very interesting person! There isn't really an "in" crowd, and I hate to be the one to break it to you. Instead there are people who have bravely taken the first step and introduced themselves to another person, or otherwise initiated communication with other people. You've got a golden opportunity at the conference; please don't let it slip past without getting connected with other people who share so

many common experiences. Becoming involved with other people is all it takes, and soon other people may be looking at *YOU* and think "I sure wish I could be 'in' like them..."

I'll close with an invitation. Come and meet me at the conference, I'd be more than happy to meet you and learn something about you. I hope you take me up on this, as I'm always looking to meet new and interesting people like you. I know we'd have plenty to talk about!

