

# SXSW Networking Guide for Students

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This is a blueprint for students on how to get the most out of a large, open-ended event like South by Southwest (SXSW). My focus is on creating and building relationships, rather than partying, entertainment or getting free stuff (all valid goals for SXSW, but not my goal).

Austin is a city where people are already open and friendly, but this goes up to 10 during SXSW. Going up to anyone and striking up a conversation is part of the culture of the event. Everyone is networking to a degree, so it's totally acceptable for you to be doing the same.

In 2025, there are tons of free events. You don't need a badge or need to spend any money.

## Mindset

Before signing up for a single event I want you to adopt a good mindset around meeting people. Here are three that I find useful:

1) *SXSW is an opportunity to **practice** social skills in a low-risk, low-consequence environment*

Here I mean building up the confidence to approach a stranger and start a conversation, asking good questions, connecting with people, and all of that. For those of us that are introverts, we may feel that we can't do this or it's outside of our nature. Maybe. The bottom line is that with each practice attempt, we get better at whatever we were practicing. With enough practice, we get good.

2) *Curiosity – something about this person or place will be very interesting to me*

Follow your curiosity! Start by going to events that you're already interested in—technology, culture, sustainability, whatever. With people, ask them about any part of their personal story that interests you. If you meet a media executive and you want to be a media executive, just ask them how they got to where they are! It's that simple.

3) *Networking is about what I can do for other people, not what other people can do for me*

To me, good networking is non-transactional. Most of us recoil from someone who we can sense has an agenda or is just trying to get something from us. By contrast, when we focus on who a person is rather than what they can provide to us, people feel less threatened, and conversations flow naturally. Focus on the former, and if you can make a useful introduction to someone you meet, do it! (As a student, you probably don't have a large network yet. You can still make someone's day better by being an engaging conversation partner.)

## Goals

As a student, I don't think you should have any specific goal for SXSW other than meeting people and getting a little outside of your comfort zone. Building good relationships will lead to introductions, new friends, job opportunities, investments, etc., over the long run.

If you are a current student, pick one of the following goals

- 1) Start a conversation with a total stranger
- 2) Set up a follow-up meeting with someone I meet, if I'm already good at meeting people

Doesn't need to be complicated.

## How to start conversations

The easiest way to start a conversation with a stranger is to wait in line for free stuff, and turn around and introduce yourself to the person behind you. Here's exactly how to do it:

- 1) Turn around and face them
- 2) Hold out your hand for a handshake
- 3) Make eye contact and smile if you are not too terrified
- 4) "Hi, I'm Akash"

They will smile, make eye contact, shake your hand, and introduce themselves. Then you say:

"Great to meet you," and you will ask one of the following questions:

- "How is your South-by going so far?"
- "What brings you to this event?"

Notice that these are open-ended questions—they don't have a yes or no answer. After the introduction (the scariest part), it's just a normal conversation.

If you get stuck, here are some open-ended questions you can ask to keep a conversation flowing:

- "What's been the best event you've gone to so far?"
- "How often do you come to SXSW" → follow up → "I'm new to SXSW, do you have any advice for me?"
- "What events are you looking forward to?"
- "What industry are you in?" OR "What's your [connection to/interest in] the [tech/media/arts/music/investment] industry?" (if you are at an industry-focused event)
- "I'm a student and don't know much about that industry, how do people get started in it?"
- "Have you seen any free food nearby?" (this is useful to eject from a conversation you feel isn't going well) → "I'm starving I'm going to try to find something"

If you feel really nervous or stuck, just be honest and blame me:

- "I'm actually pretty nervous. One of my professors ordered us to go out and meet one stranger at SXSW and I'm shy"

You can even use this as your conversation starter. If the person is not a complete weirdo they will laugh, totally get where you are coming from and help you out.

## How to find good events

First off, don't go to concerts. They are too loud to have a conversation, and people are interested in the music, not in meeting you. At evening parties, people are drinking, and using alcohol to get over your social anxiety is cheating. Go to something during the day.

Off-the-beaten-path events, particularly free ones, are often pretty good. Kind-of-busy but not too busy is best. My friend [Cam Houser](#), a 15+ year veteran of SXSW, says "the more posh an event, the less likely you will be able to make a meaningful connection there."

Here are three lists of free events:

- Austin super-connector [Marc Nathan's list](#)
- Yorkseed/[Jessica Wong's list](#)
- Lu.ma's SXSW [list](#)

## Following up

If you have a good connection with someone, you can ask to exchange contact information. Most people will be willing to connect on LinkedIn or Instagram and some may be open to giving you their emails and phone numbers. I am old-school and hand out physical business cards (most people don't use business cards anymore).

In any case, if you meet someone you want to stay in touch with, **YOU MUST FOLLOW UP WITHIN 24 HOURS**. Everybody is meeting tons of new people so within a couple of days they will have forgotten about you.

What does a follow-up entail? An email, text, Insta DM or LinkedIn message referencing where you met, what you talked about and any follow-up you may have discussed. Here's a message to a random stranger I met standing in a food line behind me:

"Hi Olivia,

Great to meet you at Grit House yesterday. Would love to come on your [podcast](#) soon to chat about emotions & finance if you're still interested. Let me know!

Thanks,

Akash"

For a student, a follow-up coffee meeting or a Zoom call to discuss the person's industry (or whatever the two of you had a mutual interest in) would be appropriate.

If people don't respond, don't take it personally. People are busy and get distracted. Ultimately this is a numbers game and not every connection will stick.

## Conclusion

That's it! Meeting real people is way more fun than doomscrolling social media all day. Have fun with it!

## About me

I'm Akash Kanojia, a finance professor at UT-Austin's McCombs School of Business. I write about developments in financial markets and the macroeconomy, as well as personal development content about the intersection of emotions and finance.

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