

Everything you needed to know about networking (but were afraid to ask)

1. What is networking?

Networking is all about building personal visibility by meeting new people who - roughly speaking - will fall into 3 groups:

- Existing clients
- Prospective clients
- Professional contacts (who'll make referrals/ introductions and also provide market insight)

Networking is NOT about selling. Your mind-set should be *"how can I help people?"* not *"what can I sell them?"* and you can help people you meet at events by:

- Making them feel comfortable when you meet simply by being friendly
- Using relaxed and open body language
- Offering them a drink
- Asking 'open' questions about THEM

Networking is wrongly considered to be solely about meeting strangers at formal events. This is not true!

Your networking should also include:

- Regular informal catch-ups with the people you know
- Arranging smaller, more informal get togethers by inviting groups of people you know and people you want to know better to a pub or café
- Having an enquiring mind; take the initiative to start conversations with people you see regularly at the gym/on the train/at the school gate/by the sports pitch

2. Is networking for me?

Not necessarily!

Networking is just one part of the business development mix but there are other ways to increase your visibility:

- Speaking at relevant events or at your firm's seminars
- Getting articles published
- Using social media

It's always better to match your activities to your personality so you can maximise your strengths.

Our experience is that there is often a default within the professional services that business development has to mean networking which has to mean formal networking events. That most definitely isn't the case! If you're more comfortable writing, speaking or even doing the research for your colleagues, that's where you should invest the majority of your BD efforts.

However, if you do want to network, success requires focus. To start think about exactly who you're trying to meet and identify which events they actually go to. Too much time is wasted attending events that aren't attended by targets just because it's easy.

3. How do I prepare ahead of an event?

Have clear goals. Many people just turn up, look like they don't really want to be there and drift around the room aimlessly. Don't fall into that trap. Set yourself goals before you go.

How many new people do you want to speak to?

How many new business cards do you want to collect?

And these shouldn't be big numbers. It's better to have 3 'meaningful conversations' than 10 so you're not racing around the room.

Do your homework. Most event organisers will send you a list of attendees in advance if you ask. You can then decide who you want to talk to at the event and use LinkedIn and the internet to find out about them so you've got something other than work to talk about.

Make sure you have current business cards with you (at all times, not just for events ... you never know who you'll bump into).

Look smart whatever the occasion. This doesn't mean spending a vast amount of money but you do need to be able to dress appropriately for every type of event.

4. What do I do at the event?

- **Don't just attend participate**

To get value from any networking you need to get involved. Make sure you go regularly so you have the opportunity to build up a relationship with your fellow attendees.

You can even get even more involved by delivering a talk or volunteering for an admin position like treasurer or chair.

- **Arrive early**

By arriving early you will be more composed and therefore present yourself better.

If you're early you can also ask the host if they'd be willing to introduce you to people you want to meet

And if you're there when people start to arrive, they'll naturally gravitate to you ... especially if you're standing near the food and drink!

- **Just be yourself, be friendly and smile**

People worry unduly about what they are going to say but the irony is that the people you meet will not remember what you said, just how they felt while they spoke to you.

It's therefore more important to focus on just having a chat. For example offer to pour tea or coffee or ask how they got to there or how long they've been coming.

And small talk is absolutely fine so check the front and back pages of the newspapers on your reception before you go (that'll give you news and sport in 5 seconds!), keep up with books, films and TV and if all else fails just ask about their family, hobbies and holidays.

- **Don't get stuck with people**

Try to keep conversations to a maximum of 10 minutes then move on. This isn't rude, everyone is there to network, not just you.

If it's a tricky conversation with someone that is not much help to you with your quest to become more visible ask "Who do you want to meet today?" and try and provide the introduction to make it easier for you to move on.

If this isn't possible just say *"It has been good meeting you, I hope you enjoy the event."*

Equally you may find yourself in very enjoyable conversation with someone but the same rule applies, move on and promise to follow up.

Don't sell

The event is a stepping stone to meeting the right people and build a rapport so you can follow up.

Instead of selling work out how you can best help the people you want to follow up with.

- Do you have market intelligence that you can share?
- Do you have personal contacts that you can introduce?
- Can you follow up by sending a helpful article, report or book?

Don't just talk about work

The most effective networkers are the ones who can just chat.

They appear not to be trying too hard and definitely aren't the ones openly trying to win work.

Talk about football, family and holidays first. Don't appear to take yourself too seriously either, gentle self-deprecation is fine.

Give yourself a reminder to help your follow up

Firstly read people's cards in front of them when they give them to you. It shows you're interested.

Then try to get in the habit of writing down notes on the back of cards to remind you of your conversation and what you learned about each contact ... but do that afterwards not in front of the person!

5. How do I follow up?

Be quick

There are two ways to follow up and both need to be done within 48 hours of meeting someone. Both steps are easy and require only a couple of minutes of your time:

1. Write a short email making reference to the event and suggesting alternative dates in 3-6 week's time to meet up informally and continue the conversation (you can even say that you "are working in the area" so you don't appear too pushy")
2. Connect via LinkedIn

Be confident

Sometimes emails get mislaid or the people you contact never get round to responding. This doesn't mean they're not interested.

Persistence, tenacity and confidence pays. If you have no joy first time around send a second email attaching something of value like a report or an article.

Be realistic

Success is not about getting immediate instructions, it's about building new relationships.

If you focus on making sure you're adding some value, you'll get your follow up coffee meeting.

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