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Networking Meetings and Networking Skills Hints and Tips

What is Networking for business?

Networking for business is a chance to talk to people; nothing more, nothing less. What is most important is how you approach that conversation and the peripherals that go with it.

“Business Networking” is the formal term used for something we all do every day when we strike up a conversation with someone we meet for the first time or even if they are a person we trust and know well.

When should I Network?

At every opportunity! When you first start networking it can be a real confidence booster to network in an environment where you feel relaxed and comfortable, but only networking in those scenarios means that you reduce your opportunities to make new contacts and generate business. Once you have some networking skills you need to step out of your comfort zone and broaden your networking experience until you can network in any environment.

What are the benefits of Networking for business?

There is a school of thought that up to 70% of business is done by word of mouth referral, i.e. someone asks the all important question “who do you know who” of someone they know and trust. There are other people who feel strongly that, with consistent networking, a higher percentage of revenue can be generated. Then, of course, there can be an element of luck by being in the right place at the right time.

Do men and women network differently?

The answer to that question is probably that it depends on the networking environment. Anyone who goes networking for business for the very first time, man or woman, without feeling some degree of apprehension and lack of confidence is a very rare human being. As with all things it depends on you, how you approach networking and how you communicate with people. In an all male environment the conversation and dynamics of a meeting are different to the culture and dynamics of an all female environment - and a mixed environment is different again.

How you can generate business from network meetings?

Successful networking boils down to six things:

- The establishment of a positive relationship and trust
- Experience and confidence
- A willingness to share
- Your own Comfort zone
- Your communication skills
- Follow-up (where it is appropriate)

Establishing Relationships and Trust

Recommendation about you to others will only happen when you have built a relationship with someone and the trust you - both on a personal and professional level. It takes time to build such a relationship and, like any relationship of value, you have to work at it.

Experience and Confidence

Confidence comes from practice and gaining leads, tips and business by referral. If you are new to networking, or don't feel confident about networking then try choosing a group that specifically offers networking in a relaxed and pressure-free style.

A Willingness to Share

There is a saying that "knowledge is power" and it is often the case. You can choose to be powerful either by keeping information to yourself, or by sharing information with others. Within networking groups, dependent on their structure, you can share information in a variety of ways. Your willingness to share your knowledge power will prove beneficial in the long-term.

Comfort Zone

There are a variety of organisations which provide an array of different styles of networking for people in business. These groups provide everything from a social or purely supportive environment to structured networking. There is, more often than not, a willingness to share knowledge and experience, provide empathy and support through difficult times and always a lot of laughter. You will also have the opportunity to gain experience and knowledge from people you meet and build a relationship with through networking.

Communication and Networking Skills

It is important that you can convey a clear message about what your business delivers. Practice what your message is and how you will deliver it, be aware that the intonation of your voice and your body language are part of the information you are delivering. Don't forget to smile! Be prepared to vary your message, that way you won't be bored with it and you will provide a larger picture of your company over time. Assess the personal style of the person you are speaking with and be prepared to be blunt or subtle

Be sincere when you ask others what they do and listen to what other people tell you about their business.

Think about referring people you know when the opportunity presents itself.

Follow-up

Follow-up every lead, tip or referral you are given.

If you promise to deliver something, make sure you do it; whether that is a follow-up contact after the networking event or anything else. Referrals are based on trust, remember that when someone refers you they do so using their reputation - if you don't deliver to them then you cannot expect them to jeopardise their reputation for you.

When you meet someone in the same discipline as you with whom you can potentially forge a positive working relationship, or someone you feel it would be useful to develop a long-term relationship, arrange a one-to-one meeting away from the networking event you are attending. This will enable you to exchange information and start to develop a relationship and trust in one another.

How can I get the most out of Networking?

Be generous and be prepared to give rather than receive, it's surprising how much comes back when you do that. Network whenever and wherever you can. Find groups or events where you feel comfortable, you will be more relaxed there and more likely to establish positive relationships and contacts. **KEEP GOING BACK** to the groups and events where you feel comfortable as well as taking yourself out of your comfort zone and going where you aren't necessarily the most comfortable - you never know who you will meet who can be a valuable contact for you. Continuity of connection and being personable are two significant weapons in your networking arsenal.

If you find yourself standing alone, look for a friendly face or a group of people you can join, but don't interrupt two people who are obviously having a meaningful conversation. If you see someone standing alone bring them into your conversation, they will feel more comfortable and be grateful to you.

If someone 'takes you under their wing' don't stick to them like glue for the remainder of the event!

Be prepared for human nature. Not everyone will like you and you won't like everyone you meet.

Should I be selective about the people I network with?

Yes, as long as that includes anyone and everyone you come into contact with! It is important to take into consideration that you need to build a relationship and establish trust for good quality referrals. **BUT the main thing to remember is that you are not trying to sell to the person you are talking with**, rather you are giving them sufficient information to be able to pass on information to their sphere of contacts and establishing a positive relationship with them.

How do I generate business from Networking?

To be on the receiving end of a referral means that people have to understand the product or service you offer and, most importantly, feel that they understand your business and know and trust you sufficiently to stake their own reputation on referring you to others.

Remember that the true networking ethos is that you should not be trying to 'sell' to the person you are talking to. What you are aiming to achieve is that that person will become a member of your unpaid sales force by referring business to you, because you have taken the time to build a relationship with them and establish the all important trust on which referrals are based.

10 tips for effective business networking are:

1. Listen to what others are telling you about their business.
2. Have the ability to communicate effectively who you are and what you do.
3. Build a relationship!
4. If you see someone standing on their own, draw them into your conversation.
5. If you promise to deliver something, make sure you do it; whether that is a follow-up contact after the networking event or anything else.
6. Maintain the relationship you have with people you know, but don't spend all your time in the comfort zone of talking to established contacts; you won't make any new contacts or identify new business opportunities by doing that.
7. Don't hard sell to the people you meet.
8. Be aware of the impact of intruding on someone-else's personal space, your tone of voice and your body language. A simple smile can light up a room! Understand group body language so you know when to join a group and when you are about to interrupt at a vital stage.
9. Deal with others as you would want them to deal with you. Your reputation is your most positive asset - if you have a good one.
10. Don't miss an opportunity to network, whether that is at a business networking event or in a social environment where you can make new contacts.

Sadly, not everyone makes the most of business networking opportunities and some examples of this would be:

- **Concentrating on selling** rather than exchanging information is a real turn-off in networking for business.
- Not delivering a promise or failing to follow up.
- Misreading the body language of groups.

What successful networking really comes down to is the relationships you build and how you approach networking, your ability to listen and to communicate effectively - and, of course, actually being there!

TYPES OF NETWORKING

When it comes to networking for business there is a multiplicity of choice available for business people to select a type of networking for business event that they are most comfortable with. The costs associated with networking can vary significantly too, from events that are paid for on the door for as little as £10, to membership and associated weekly fees that can amount to £1,000 per year. Among them are:

- **Breakfast meetings.** Provide very positive, structured (and often quite formal) meetings, with limitations to one company per business discipline. Absolutely brilliant if you are the sort of person who is at their best at the crack of dawn and loves a hearty breakfast. These networking groups are based on membership of the networking organisation and commitment to attend on a regular basis. Usually, you will be expected to do a 1 minute presentation about your company and take an active part in the referral session that follows.
- **Open Networking Groups.** These events are normally professionally run, structured but without formality, do not require you to do a 60 second presentation about your business and will not have referral sessions either. They may incorporate different styles of networking from speed networking to more relaxed round table networking opportunities. These groups are less likely to require membership fees but will often have an attendance fee associated with the event. Events may be held at different times of the day or in the evening and usually do not provide more than tea/coffee as refreshment. These events will provide good opportunities to meet a diverse group of business people where you can establish positive business relationships.
- **People who Lunch.** Provide very positive opportunities to meet other business people in a relaxed environment, network informally over lunch and then usually with some structured networking afterwards. In this social environment there is very good opportunity to establish and build relationships that will be fruitful in the future. Again these groups are based largely around membership of the organisation and you get best value from attending regularly. Meetings are held in the middle of the day, after all that's when lunchtime is!
- **Unstructured Networking.** These events provide large numbers of people for you to network with. Mostly, but not always, they comprise groups that run well organised but unstructured and informal networking events, deliberately designed on the basis that they provide you with the chance to meet a large number of people amongst those who attend. As a rule they do not require membership, are open and honest about the positive networking opportunities that you can find there and will provide light refreshments only. These events can be held at any time of the day or in the evening, providing a wide choice of opportunity for business networking.

- **Specialist Groups.** Provide very positive networking experiences, whether they are networking for business or specific professional groups. Included in this category are, for example, networking groups for women in business, groups run by the local Chamber of Commerce, Small Business organisations and professional bodies. The culture and dynamics of these networking meetings are different to those mentioned previously. With a far greater probability of a relaxed atmosphere, people who attend can feel less pressured to deliver something and just enjoy the networking process. These groups meet most frequently in the evening, negating the need to take time out of the working day. For entrepreneurs in particular, that alone can be a significant benefit. Most of these types of group will be membership based with membership fees varying from as little as £20 per month to anything up to 3 figures for annual membership.
- **Virtual Networking.** A lot of both social and business networking is now done on line. Despite the fact that people may never meet face-to-face, relationships are established on-line and business generated through those relationships. A good example of this, for business networking, would be LinkedIn whose very large on-line membership stretches literally round the globe as well as Facebook, Twitter, Naymz, WeCanDo.Biz and many more.

And Finally

Remember that networking is the journey, not the destination

Travel the road well to reap the rewards.

So, the next time you get an invitation to attend a networking event - seize the opportunity with both hands.

Happy networking!