

The art of networking

Networking is the art of building and sustaining *mutually* beneficial relationships. It is the way we will do business into the future. Forget cold calling, become an expert networker and you won't ever have to make a cold call again. In the definition above, it is important to highlight that the relationship must be mutually beneficial – that is, the relationship must provide a win for both parties. I think that's where most of us get it wrong. We take the "spray and pray" approach when networking. That is, we give out and take as many business cards from as many people as possible without too much thought to each encounter. Networking is actually about helping others and allowing others to help you – it's not about selling anything! (not at this stage anyway).

There are three types of people in this world; those who make things happen, those that watch things happen and those that wonder what has happened. Expert networkers *make things happen*. First impressions are important and your reputation starts with the first impression. Your reputation is what others think of you – it starts with the first impression and then builds as people get to know you. You can quite easily destroy your reputation if you act inconsistently or unpredictably. Remember that for networking to be worthwhile, you must GIVE as well as TAKE.

The interesting thing is that networking is actually about **building relationships before you need them** and then when you do, you can be sure that the person contacted will be willing to help. Diane Darling in her book *Networking for Career Success* says that "It's a personal connection with people who may want what you have, know others who do, or play a role in the decision. Selling connects the solution and the problem. When marketing and networking have done what they can do, selling is much easier".

There are many different types of networks – your family, your partner's family, neighbourhood; business and if you have children then there is also the school and childcare centre networks. Having said that, I know that many of you have outlook folders full of contacts, yet how much do you know about each of those

contacts. A person is not in your network unless you know about them both personally and professionally and if called upon they would want to help you.

Personal Experience

I have always had a fear of networking. I am an extrovert, but would rather stick a pin in my eye than walk up to someone I don't know and strike up a conversation. My brother on the other hand is an excellent networker. He, interestingly is an introvert, yet can walk up to any person in a room and make them feel special. He is a natural networker and when I considered his approach, I noticed the following things:

1. Approach those that are either standing on their own or don't look huddled in an intimate conversation
2. Shake hands, make eye contact, smile and request a business card
3. Keep your hands out of your pockets and maintain a friendly body language
4. Keep your questions neutral, consider,
 - a. What brings you here?
 - b. How do you know the host?
 - c. What made you decide to come to this event?
 - d. What is your occupation?
5. Actively listen. That is, focus on what is being said and make a mental note of what is being said.
6. Make a note about each person on their business card so you don't forget the encounter.
7. Always leave before the other person. Say "it was lovely to meet you and thank you for spending time with me".

Another important thing to remember before attending any event is to make sure that you have packed your kit (business cards; paper for note taking etc.) and that you are dressed appropriately. Remember that first impressions are very important so don't risk standing out!

Expert networkers know how to scan the room and get a sense of who is there before deciding who to approach. If you want to approach VIP's, then do so early before they

get swamped. Make sure that you have done some research on the person before the event so that you can strike up a meaningful dialogue.

Always ask for a business card before offering yours. Make sure to focus on contacts not cards – the art of networking is about making valuable contacts who you can help and who can help you.

Successful headhunters know the importance of creating networks. Imagine how much easier your job would become if you knew where to go for help in sourcing your ideal candidate.

Follow up

Networking is about building relationships. Ask about preferences for follow up (e-mail; telephone etc.) and use that method. If you invite someone to lunch or coffee, be clear about your expectations. Follow up on a regular basis. When phoning, know what you want and what you are going to say. Always return calls within 48 hours and answer e-mail promptly, always using e-mail etiquette.

Once or twice a month, meet with someone you like and ask what you can do for them. Get involved with professional organisations and organize networking meetings within your company. A word of caution though – choose your causes carefully. Whether you choose a cause for business or personal reasons, it will reflect on both. Maintain your network and you will never have to start from scratch again. ■



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