

Networking

Networking is proactively developing contacts in your business and/or personal life usually with an objective in mind (such as meeting potential clients, learning more about an industry, etc). Networks can be very informal (like chatting to other parents at the school gates or talking to people at a social event) or organised events with a much more formal structure and purpose.

Before getting started

A few ideas to consider before you start networking:

- What is your objective? Deepening industry knowledge, making new friends, identifying sales leads, etc. Most of us are pretty busy, so it's wise to identify what you are trying to achieve, and then choose networking opportunities which will fulfil your objective.
- Networking isn't just an external thing – networking within your current organisation is often a very worthwhile exercise to learn more about how the business operates and who does what.
- If you are considering a more formal networking opportunity like an industry seminar, you might want to think about:
 - o Who will be there, and who you particularly want to meet?
 - o What you want to take with you – business cards are a must. It might also be useful to have a pen and paper, in case you need to note anything down, and perhaps a diary.
 - o Address, directions, and parking availability – the more you know up front, the more relaxed you can be on arrival.
 - o Dress code – what is appropriate for the event? If you feel comfortable in what you are wearing, you are more likely to feel relaxed and confident

When arriving at a networking event

Lots of people find their first experiences of networking a bit nerve racking. The key is to remember that if you are nervous, you won't be the only one, and networking can, and should be fun.

- Before you go in, think positive thoughts about what you can contribute to the event.
- Take a few deep breaths, check your appearance and confidently walk in with a smile. Just by smiling you make yourself seem approachable to others.
- Always try to arrive on time. It's much easier to join conversations at the beginning of an event than once it has started, especially if speeches or presentations are in progress.
- Look for others who are either standing alone, or look nervous. They will greatly appreciate you approaching them and starting a conversation.
- People generally prefer a firm (but not bone crushing) handshake. Practice on a friend and ask for feedback.
- If groups have already formed when you arrive, choose a group to join and wait for a break in the conversation to introduce yourself. You might want to have prepared your introduction if the nature of what you do, or who you work for, takes a bit of explaining. Try it out on somebody you trust before you use it – does it make sense and clearly describe you without being too long or confusing?
- When others introduce themselves to you, make sure their name registers in your memory. One way to do that is to attach a mental flag, for example, Greg Barker - that's my uncle's first name and the surname is the name of the shop where I bought my black trousers. You should make notes after the event which make later conversations easier to start, eg, Greg - going to Fiji on holiday, has two boys who love rugby, etc. If you make contact later, you can remember to start off by asking how the holiday was, or how the rugby season is going. If you have obtained a business card, you might want to write the notes on the back for easy recall.
- Some people find it difficult to start a conversation with people they don't know well, or at all. It's always good to have a few conversation starters up your sleeve to alleviate this anxiety. It's best to avoid anything too controversial, which could offend somebody, eg, comments about religion or politics.
- A few generic ideas to try:
 - Before going to an event, read the front and back page of the newspaper to get the headlines news and sport. If conversation dries up you can always use this

knowledge to get things going again. “Did anybody hear about the latest research into”

- Depending on the nature of the event you could use questions like, “How long have you been a member of”, “Have you been to one of these evenings before”, etc.
- If the event is a general networking event, you could always ask people what line of business they are in, and who they work for as a conversation starter,
- The most important aspects of networking are listening and building rapport and trust. It’s usually not appropriate to go into full sales mode at a networking function. It is crucial to listen to what people are telling you about themselves and their businesses, and identify those that have potential to become clients. If they have potential, suggest making an appointment to talk later about how you might be able to help them, or send information as a first step. Open ended questions, which start with ‘why’, ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘how’, etc., are most likely to generate the most information for you to base that assessment on.
- It’s always wise to avoid jumping to conclusions, pre-judging people or isolating those from the conversation you don’t perceive to be useful contacts. An openminded, inclusive attitude will almost certainly yield a better result.
- In the course of talking to people, you will undoubtedly come across mutual acquaintances or contacts. It is always wise only to share positive views about other people, and avoid engaging in gossip or hearsay. If there’s nothing positive to say, don’t say anything at all.
- When attending a networking event, you are there to make new contacts. It’s therefore important that you don’t stick with one person the whole evening, and miss meeting anybody else. Sometimes breaking away and moving on can be tricky. A couple of useful strategies are:
 - Introducing your new contact to somebody else and ensuring they are in conversation before you excuse yourself.
 - Expressing your pleasure at meeting somebody, and excusing yourself to go to the bathroom, etc.
- It’s usually not advisable to drink alcohol excessively at networking events. You want to be able to remember who you networked with!

After the networking event

- After a networking event it's important to review how successful the event was in achieving your objective. If it didn't achieve the objective, then perhaps you need to reconsider the type of networking you are doing. If it was useful, make notes of people you met, actions you committed to, new business opportunities, useful ideas, etc., while it's fresh in your memory. If your objective was to meet potential clients, you should input details into your client management system immediately before business cards get lost, or your recall about what you said you would do gets hazy.
- Always follow through on any promises you made within a few days. If you promised to send details of your product or call for an appointment, it is usually best to do this fairly soon while they still remember your conversation.
- If you are struggling to find an established networking opportunity that suits your purpose – why not create one of your own. For example, if you are interested in talking with other people in your profession in non-competing businesses, why not pick the most interesting ones and call them and invite them to morning tea at your place? It's a good way of saving time by really targeting what you need.