

Face-to-Face Business Networking -*What's Your Strategy?*

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I want to help you to make sure that every precious second of your time that you spend networking counts. Below you'll find my 6 practical steps to developing your own personal networking strategy.

Face-to-face business networking is a much cheaper way to promote your business than advertising or PR. It is a low-cost activity where the pressure is on your time rather than on your pocket. It's more effective than on-line networking as you build important personal relationships more quickly.

If you are in business, you need to get out there and get to know people..... so that they know you.

Nevertheless, meeting someone just once is unlikely to bring you new business. The key lies in repeat-encounters. However, the old maxim still holds – **time is money**. Here's how to spend that time wisely:

Step # 1 - Determine *why* you need to network and set clear networking objectives for yourself

There are lots of different reasons why we chose to network. Some people network solely to identify business opportunities. Some people network to expand their numbers of social and industry contacts. Some people network to find out what is going on in a particular sector or within a particular professional or vocational group. Many people network in order to learn more about a variety of things.

You need to know exactly why you are networking so that you know exactly how to network productively.

Be aware that your networking needs may change subtly from time to time. It will pay you back enormously in terms of time, effort and efficiency if you periodically review your networking strategy.

Action - List the main (important and urgent) objectives for your networking activities for the next twelve months. These objectives might be aligned to a personal or business plan that you have developed. Be very specific in terms of what you need to

do and why and when you need to do it. Use the SMART principle so that your networking objectives are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound.

Step # 2 - Audit your existing networks

Once you are very clear about your networking objectives you need to do a quick evaluation of all of your existing active networks – both the informal and the formal ones. Informal networks might include groups such as family, friends, colleagues, school/college friends. Formal networks are groups such as industry or interest bodies, professional institutes, or organised business networks.

Action - Make a ‘master list’ of your existing networks on one sheet of paper. Then, for each of those networks, take a blank sheet of paper and brain-storm that network. What you want to end up with is a set of individual lists of all of your *active* contacts within in each of your current networks. An *active* contact is someone with whom you have interacted during the last three months or so. If you are used to ‘mind-mapping’, that method makes this step really easy.

Step # 3 – Align your ‘master list’ to your new networking objectives

The purpose of this step is to identify whether your existing set of networks will support you in the achievement of your updated networking goals or whether you need to start networking with new groups or types of people.

Action – Ask yourself this question. *Are there other relevant groups of people that I need to network with to achieve my current networking objectives?* If the answer is *yes*, your immediate mission is to identify, locate and engage with these new groups or individuals. Different networking objectives may require you to interact within different networking groups.

Step # 4 – Galvanise your existing networks into action

If your priorities or circumstances have shifted recently, you will most certainly need to meet and engage with new and different people within your previously-established networks.

Action – In the context of your new networking objectives, review the names on each of the sheets that you have prepared for each of your networks. Are there other people available to you through those existing networks that you have not included in

your list? For example, are there wider family members, ex-colleagues, or co-professionals with whom it would benefit you to acquaint yourself? Plan to connect with these additional people at your earliest opportunity.

Step # 5 –Re-educate your existing contacts

If your priorities have changed recently, it makes sense to let your acquaintances in your existing networks know.

Action – Make sure that your introduction, or ‘elevator pitch’, is up to date. For many of us, the way in which we introduce ourselves may depend on which network we are interacting within. Make sure that if you have a ‘set’ of introductions that they are all freshly aligned to your networking goals. Do this in advance of any networking activities. Don’t get caught on the spot at events or meetings where you might get tangled in a long explanation about how or why you have changed your slant.

Step # 6 – Encourage your contacts to be your ambassadors and your sales reps!

**Remember, networking is not so much about who you know.
It’s more about who knows you!**

Action – Make yourself memorable. One extremely good networker that I know carries a stunningly beautiful pair of diamond earrings in his pocket. Not so strange, really. He’s a master jeweller and a diamond grader. You should see people flocking around him when he’s in action. No-one ever forgets having met him either!

Use every available opportunity when you are networking to become involved in the event itself. Here are some suggestions:

- Get to know your network organisers or facilitators
- Volunteer to ‘buddy-up’ with newcomers at formal networking events
- Become a connector, introduce your acquaintances to each-other
- Offer to present a short talk on your subject(s) of expertise
- Extend a special discount to fellow-networkers
- Offer to be a table facilitator or host during round-table networking activities or exercises
- Follow up a promising chance encounter with a one-to-one meeting over coffee or lunch

Relationships + Reputation = Referrals

In short, your time is precious but you do need to network. As your personal circumstances and professional needs change, so too do your networking needs change. Exploit every minute that you spend networking by having a sound, well-founded, up-to-date networking strategy.

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