

Effective Business Networking: 5 Tips For Mastering The Art of Networking

By [Soni Pitts](#)

The heart of any business is the connection it has with other businesses and individuals that it can call upon to help meet its needs. Networking - any activity designed to create, maintain and utilize interpersonal connections - is an essential business skill. But not all business people take the time to truly master. However, without a solid understanding of how to network effectively and efficiently, no business can make the vital connections that it needs to survive and prosper in today's super-connected economy. Here are some tips you can use to increase your networking - and business - success

Go with a goal. One of the first and most common mistakes that people make when entering a networking situation (planned or otherwise) is to fail to have a firm goal in mind. Are you looking to acquire new prospects, meet colleagues for possible collaborations, create a mutual referral partnership, create name recognition for you and your business, find funding or just "shop around" for interesting news and trends you can use? If you haven't taken the time to determine what your goals are for the encounters ahead, you will have a hard time meeting them.

Of course, most businesses have several different needs, but in many cases any given networking opportunity is unlikely to provide more than one or two types of results, depending on the situation at hand. For example, if you are attending an event made up primarily of others in your industry or trade, you are unlikely to meet prospects, since everyone will be a provider just like you, nor are you likely to find referral partners, since almost everyone will be a direct competitor. So if your primary needs are clients and referrals, such events, while not an entire waste of time, might not be your best use of it. On the other hand, if you are desperately seeking a partner to expand or are looking to find out the latest, greatest technology in the field to offer to your client base, then you're definitely going to be in the right place.

Hone your message. When someone asks you what you do, can you articulate not only your business but it's benefit to them in a clear and concise manner? How about your "elevator speech" or 15-second intro - is it crisp, to the point and compelling, or do people's eyes glaze over before you get to the end? This is not the time to give a dry and deadly-dull job description. Save that for your resume. When someone asks about you and your business, you are being given a golden, but brief, opportunity to knock his or her socks off and to persuade them that you are the best thing to happen to them since sliced bread. Make sure you do so.

Important - leave your sales pitch at home! Networking is networking, and sales is sales. Confuse the two and you'll lose out on both. Nobody wants to be sold to, especially when they're quite plainly not in a sales environment. And remember that anyone who tries to work a networking event under the "three-foot rule" (anyone within three feet is an opportunity to make a sale) is likely to find others unwilling to get within three feet of them in a very short period of time.

Check your gear. Make sure that you have everything you need to make a great impression. Are your business cards or other hand-outs up to date, and as professional-looking as you can make them? If this is a planned event, do you know who will be attending and have you isolated a few people you definitely want to make sure to meet, or are you going in blind and resigned to winging it?

And don't forget to double-check the time, date and venue. Nothing is more irritating than showing up only to find that you're too early, too late or unable to find a parking space closer than a quarter-mile away.

Educate your audience. Are you seeking a collaborative partner for a project? Then make sure everyone knows what the project is and what sort of partner you are looking for (and the general parameters of the partnership they'll be investing their time into). If you're looking for referrals, then do your potential referral sources know what constitutes a good referral for you? It's a waste of your time and a drain on your referrer's good will and reputation if you turn down or do a bad job for everyone they send to you because the referrals were inappropriate. Likewise, a well-educated referral source might wind up sending you fewer referrals, but those are much more likely to be quality prospects that have a high probability of becoming solid clients.

On the other hand, if you are directly prospecting do your prospects know that you're the answer to their prayers and why? Remember that all prospects are tuned into station WII-FM - What's In It For Me - and unless you make sure that they know why they should consider working with you, they won't.

Follow through. The most important part of networking happens after the initial contact. The best impression, the snappiest laser marketing message and the deepest desire to work together will all come to naught if they don't hear from you in a timely manner - or even worse, never hear from you at all. No matter who said what about calling whom, always follow up promptly and in a manner designed to strengthen the relationship and add value for the other person.

A simple follow-up email may be okay for old contacts touching base, but for a new contact that can provide you with crucial funding or superior referrals, or a hot prospect itching to clear your warehouse of your top-shelf merchandise your follow through needs to have all the finesse, power and elegance of a figure skater's best jump - and all the holding power of a solid landing.

There are three keys to an effective follow through:

It reinforces the original intent of the contact. Refer to your original conversation, restating any key points and reaffirming any agreements that were made or intimated. Follow through on any promises you made to deliver information, provide samples, initiate a meeting, put through a request, whatever - before the follow-up call, unless time constraints or lead-time make that impossible.

It carries the scent of enthusiasm without the stench of desperation. Follow up as promptly and as regularly or frequently as the circumstance warrants, but don't turn into a stalker or a pest. And if you can find a way to add value to the relationship through your skills, influence, position or connections, by all means offer to do so, but don't cross the line from generous associate to obsequious sycophant. And if the other person makes it clear that they are not interested, move on. "Kicking and screaming" is not an acceptable level of participation in networking, and neither is "beaten into submission."

It includes the seeds for the next contact. Don't get caught in the dead-end follow up. Unless it is clear that no further relationship is warranted or desired, make sure that there is some agreement on a next step or arrangement made to continue the conversation. Make that phone call and at the end, set up an appointment for lunch a few weeks down the road. At lunch, offer to forward an important report or offer to broker a desirable introduction to someone higher up the food chain, and so on. Make sure you never leave the table without an invitation to resume your seat at a later date.

Like a good golf swing or a stunning presentation, effective networking boils down to three essential stages of activity: preparation, delivery and follow through. And like an electrical circuit with a short or a break, a failure at any of these points stops the flow of life-giving connective energy - the healthy and continually renewed cycle of which your business requires to maintain a strong, stable potential for growth, resilience and success.

Mastering the art of effective networking, like any other business activity, requires time, dedication and attention. But in the end, the dividends it pays are well worth the time it took to cultivate them. Take the time to master these five tips and you will be amply rewarded with the prodigious fruits of your networking labor.

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