

Business Networking

Business networking tips and techniques for networking events and networking websites

Business networking is an effective low-cost marketing method for developing sales opportunities and contacts, based on referrals and introductions - either face-to-face at meetings and gatherings, or by other contact methods such as phone, email, and increasingly social and business networking websites (such as the Businessballs Community on this website).

The shortened term 'networking' can be confused with computer networking/networks, which is different terminology, relating to connection and accessibility of multiple computer systems.

A business network of contacts is both a route to market for you, and a marketing method. Business networking offers a way to reach decision-makers which might otherwise be very difficult to engage with using conventional advertising methods.

In addition, business networking brings with it the added advantage of recommendation and personal introduction, which are always very helpful for developing business opportunities.

Business networking is a way for you to make the maxim, "It's not what you know, it's who you know.." work for you.

The principles and techniques of business networking are mostly common-sense. Many of the behavioural principles apply also to business and relationships generally, and specifically to selling, managing, coaching, facilitating, etc.

Business Networking - Quick Tips Summary

Here are ten of the most important principles for effective business networking. More details are linked from each tip to bigger explanations below.

Consider that all sorts of professional people outside of the business community can also be very helpful networking contacts - for example, scientists, lecturers, educators, councillors, etc. When developing your networking plans, think beyond the people you'd typically see at other business networking events. Some of the most important connections are not business people, and consequently you need to be creative in reaching them. The examples of networking situations/methods below provides help with this later.

These tips apply broadly to any sort of business networking - face-to-face, organized events, business social networking websites, etc:

ten essential principles

1. Elevator speech. Describe yourself concisely and impressively.
2. Be different. Differentiate yourself. Aim high. Be best at something.
3. Help others. Help others and you will be helped.
4. Personal integrity. Integrity, trust and reputation are vital for networking.
5. Relevant targeting. Groups and contacts relevant to your aims and capabilities.
6. Plans and aims. Plan your networking - and know what you want.
7. Follow up. Following up meetings and referrals makes things happen.
8. Be positive. Be a positive influence on everyone and everything.
9. Sustained focused effort. Be focused - and ever-ready.
10. Life balance. Being balanced and grounded builds assurance.

1. describe yourself - elevator speech

Use these principles also in text-based descriptions for the web and printed materials, etc.

This is commonly called an 'elevator speech' or 'elevator pitch' - as if you were to meet a potentially important contact for the first time in an elevator at a conference and he/she asks you: "What do you do?" You have no more than 20 seconds - perhaps just 10-15 seconds - between floors to explain, and to make such an impressive impact that the person asks for your contact details.

If you talk (or write) too much, the listener (or reader) will become bored, or think you are rude or too self-centred.

Be concise. You will demonstrate consideration and expertise by conveying your most relevant points in as short a time as possible.

Here are the main points for creating your elevator speech:

1. your name "My name is..." Look the other person in the eye. Smile. Shoulders back. Speak with confidence. Sincerity and passion are crucial in making a strong early impression.

2. your business name "I work for..." or "My business is ..." Loud clear proud again. Do not ask "Have you heard of us..?" or wait for recognition.

3. based and covering where "I am based..." and "I cover..." Adapt the town, city, geography for the situation. There is little value in mentioning a tiny village if you are at a global gathering, or your global coverage if you are at a local town gathering. Make this relevant to the situation.

4. your personal specialism and/or offering, and your aims Be different and special and better in some way from your competitors. Be meaningful for the event or situation or group, and as far as you can guess, be meaningful for the contact. Express what you offer in terms of positive outcomes for those you help or supply, rather than focusing on technical details from your own viewpoint. Load your statements here with special benefits or qualities. Be positive, proud and ambitious in your thinking and expression of what you do. Include in this statement what your aims are, to show you have ambition and that you know what you are seeking from network contacts.

Depending on the situation, aim to complete your explanation in less than 20 seconds.

Less is more: lots of powerful points in very few words make a much bigger impact than a lengthy statement.

It is a sign of a good mind if you can convey a lot of relevant impressive information in a very short time.

Conversely, a long rambling statement shows a lack of preparation, professionalism and experience.

N.B. In some situations your speech may flow smoother by inverting points 3 and 4, or combining them. If your organizational structure is complex do not attempt to explain it. The other person is not interested in this level of detail now - they just need to know where you operate, and an indication of scale.

While you are speaking look the other person in the eyes, and be aware of his/her body language to gauge for interest and reaction to you personally, and to help your assessment of the other person's character and mood.

After your 'elevator speech' end in a firm, positive, constructive way.

Ending with a question enables more to happen than letting the discussion tail off nowhere or into polite small-talk.

Depending on the situation and visible reaction (again see body language for clues of interest) you can end in various ways, for example:

"What's your interest here/at this event?"

"What are you most wanting to get out of this event/your visit here?", or obviously if you've not already asked:

"What do you do?"

If you already know the other person's interests and motives, for example ask:

"How would you like to improve/change/grow... (various options, for example - your own network, your own business activities, this sort of event, etc)?"

After giving your elevator speech avoid the temptation to force your business card onto the other person (unless this is the tone and expectation of the event), and certainly do not launch a full-blooded sales pitch.

Instead try to develop the discussion around what the other person wants to do, achieve, change, grow, etc.

And be on your guard for interruptions and sudden opportunities:

Many highly competent business people have a habit of interrupting and cutting short discussions when they see an opportunity.

This means you may not always finish your elevator speech, in which case allow the discussion to progress, rather than try to complete what you planned to say.

Be prepared at any time to respond effectively to an interruption like, "Okay, I get the picture - now what exactly do you need?.."

2. be different and ambitious

The sales training and marketing sections contain lots of guidance about developing or refining your offering so that it is strongly differentiated from what is already available in the market-place, whatever your market-place is.

If there is no special difference between you and other providers, then people have no reason whatsoever to choose to work with you.

Look again at how you describe your business offering (or yourself as a person) - what's different or special about it (or you) compared with all the others?

If there is no difference, you must find a way to create one.

Sometimes this is merely a matter of redefining or placing different emphasis on what you already are and already do.

This difference must be something that plenty of people will find appealing; ideally irresistible. If you are struggling to find a difference or market advantage, look at your competitors and talk to your customers, and discover what's missing and what can be dramatically improved out there. There is always at least one thing, usually more - perhaps you can bundle two or three powerful market advantages together.

This difference needs to shine out in your elevator speech, and be echoed in your subsequent discussions whenever initial interest develops towards supplying something, or putting a collaborative project together.

Aim high and big when thinking about and expressing yourself and your aims. Be realistic of course, but aim to be the best and to lead in some way, in whatever specialisms and market-place you operate.

Your aims should also suggest what you are seeking from business networking - otherwise, there's no reason for you to be networking.

Business networking is not simply finding customers in one-to-one meetings and connections; it's building a strong network, helpful for your aims. Accordingly project yourself as a great networker, as well as being a great supplier or specialist.

Business networkers want to work with other networkers who aim high, who have great ambitions; people who see what can be, not merely what is; and who strive for change and improvement.

These attitudes make things happen.

When you meet like-minded networkers with these attitudes, your network will grow because they'll see you can make things happen too.

3. help others - give before you receive

Always prioritise helping and giving to others ahead of taking and receiving for yourself.

You must give in order to receive. Be helpful to others and you will be helped in return.

Networks of people are highly complex - often it is not possible to see exactly how and why they are working for you, so you must trust that goodness is rewarded, even if the process is hidden and the effect takes a while.

Use the principle of 'what goes around comes around'.

You could think of this as Karma in business.

A possible explanation of how Karma (or whatever you call it) produces positive outcomes is found in the rule of 'cause and effect', or the scientific law (loosely speaking) that 'every action has an equal reaction'.

Good deeds and helpfulness tend to produce positive effects. They are usually remembered and often repaid. The giver builds reputation and trust. Referrals tend to result.

Imagine yourself having lots of personal connections like this. You become known as a helpful person. Word about you spreads, and your reputation grows.

People who give are seen to have strength to give. Followers gravitate to strong giving people.

Helping others extends far beyond your personal specialism or line of work. Networking is about working within a system (of people) enabling relevant high quality introductions and cooperations, which get great results for the participants. These enabling capabilities transcend personal specialisms.

Cybernetics provides one interesting and useful way to understand how best to approach this. In adapting cybernetics for business networking, the technique is two-pronged:

interpret (especially what people need and what will help them)

respond (in a way which those involved will find helpful)

At a simpler level, always try to ask helpful questions. These typically begin with 'what' and 'how', and address an area of interest to the other person, not you.

Open questions (who, what, how, when, etc - also "Tell me about...") give the other person opportunity to speak and express their views and feelings:

Ask people:

"How can I help you?"

"What can I do for you?"

Closed questions (requiring a yes or no answer, or another single response, for example "Is this your first time here?") do not offer the other person much opportunity to talk, although at certain times a good relevant closed question can be vital for clarifying things:

"Do you mean X or Y?"

"Do you want to do X or would you prefer that I do it?"

The questioning section of the sales training guide contains many useful pointers about effective questioning techniques, from the view of helping others.

Sharon Drew Morgen's Facilitative Methodology, while primarily developed for selling, is strongly based on working with systems (of people especially) and includes many excellent ideas and techniques which can be used in business networking and helping others.

The communications concepts of NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) and TA (Transactional Analysis) also contain useful techniques for helping others, and for understanding the underpinning psychology.

Be creative and constructive in how you regard others and how you might help them. Being defensive and making assumptions tends to limit options and growth.

For example try to see your competitors as potential allies. There is a fine dividing line between the two behaviours, and positioning too many people/companies in the competitor camp can make life unnecessarily difficult. When you talk to your competitors you will often surprise yourselves at the opportunities to work together, in areas (service, territory, sector, application, etc) where you do not compete, and even possibly in areas where you do compete. This is particularly so for small businesses who can form strategic alliances with like-minded competitors to take a joint-offering to a market and compete for bigger contracts.

4. keep your integrity - build trust and reputation

Always keep your integrity.

Sometimes a situation arises which tempts us to do the wrong thing, causing harm or upset that could have been avoided.

Making such a mistake can damage personal integrity.

We are all human; mistakes happen. If you do make a mistake or wrong decision - whether it significantly undermines your integrity or not - always admit it and apologise.

Failing to apologise for wrong-doing often damages a person's integrity and reputation far more than the original misjudgment itself.

We only need to think of how we view people in high and public authority, notably politicians, when they fail to take responsibility and admit their mistakes. Some integrity is lost. Do it a few times and all integrity is lost.

People of low integrity sooner or later find that the only friends they have left are other people of low integrity.

Significantly, integrity is vital for trust to develop. Trust is simply not possible without integrity.

Building trust is essential for growing a strong business network.

Lack of trust prevents successful business networking.

Certain connections are absolutely impossible to make until a very high level of trust is established.

Empathy and effective listening greatly assist the process of building trust.

These qualities require you to be genuinely interested in others; to listen properly, and to reflect back meaningfully and helpfully.

Following up (covered below) is also a vital feature of building trust and reputation.

You will probably know a few very solid people who always keep their commitments, and who never make a commitment which they cannot keep. Aim to be like this.

Reliability and dependability are highly valued qualities in relationships, especially relationships involving referrals and recommendations, because someone's reputation is at stake.

The words 'reliable' and 'dependable' do not mean that you are always available to everyone. These words mean simply that when you say you will do something you will do it.

5. seek relevant groups and connections

Identify and target groups and connections which are relevant to your aims and capabilities.

Relevance can be according to several different things, for example:

Geography

Size

Sector

Social grouping (e.g., ethnic, gender, age, seniority, etc)

Political or religious grouping

Trade or society grouping

Academic or technical grouping

Other common interest (e.g., social enterprise, environmental, Fair Trade, etc)

The more relevant your targeting of groups and contacts, then more useful your meetings and referrals will be.

Other professional people can be important networking contacts. Don't limit your targeting just to obvious business people.

Certain non-business professional people can be hugely influential in networks, and greatly trusted because of their neutrality and professional standing - educators and scientists, for example. Journalists, surgeons, and magistrates, also. There are many others. It is not easy to make connections with these people through conventional business networking, but remember that a network is not only made of business-people, and be awake to these non-commercial connections when the chance comes.

If you find that your networking is producing very low opportunities for follow up and referral, try to improve your targeting. Find different groups and methods, in other words.

A true business network is a connected system of people within which referrals and opportunities can be passed through several connections, or circulated to all those connected. Networking thus can extend far beyond simply having lots of random one-to-one meetings.

A given number of people who are connected for a reason will generally be more productive than the same number of random connections.

So don't go aimlessly after every networking opportunity which comes your way; instead try to find networks which already function well or have the potential to do so; and consider and decide which sort of groups and contacts will be most helpful for your aims and capabilities - ideally remembering that you need to be able to help them, as well as they should be able to help you.

Within most networks people tend to have a few close and trusted connections. Choose these, your most trusted and closest associates, very carefully.

Reputations are built according to your chosen contacts, in addition to how you yourself behave.

The old expression is generally true: "You can tell a man by the company he keeps..." (Or woman of course.)

So focus your efforts on groups and connections of integrity, as well as relevance.

You can identify your target group criteria in your networking strategy or plan, explained next.

6. plan your networking - know what you want - manage it

All projects need managing. Business networking is a project, and so it needs managing. You can use various tools to manage your networking.

You must manage your networking, or it will manage you.

Some people plan with shapes and connections on a big sheet of paper. Others prefer a spreadsheet. Use whatever you find comfortable.

Be able to plan and monitor your networking activities.

It is important to know exactly what you want, because you will be asked - very directly by powerful potential contacts - and you will need to give a clear answer.

An activity which has no clear planned outcomes is liable to be pulled in all sorts of unwanted directions.

As with any project, you will only move towards your aim when you keep focused on that aim.

If you don't know what to plan, then probably some research is necessary:

In terms of evaluating and choosing a potential networking group - especially a big online community - investigate the tactics that successful members are using. Ask a leading member for pointers. This will help you assess the group's relevance to your needs and strengths.

You will save yourself from attending time-wasting events, and registering with time-wasting websites, if you do some research before committing valuable time to deeper involvement.

A plan is vital because business networking can be a very time-consuming activity.

Have some targets and measurables, and monitor results.

A structured approach can be especially important for very sociable networkers.

Business networking can be a very enjoyable activity, and for some people can seem a lot more productive than it actually is, so stay mindful of business results and cost-effectiveness.

Here is a simple example for planning and monitoring networking, which extends the elevator speech template above.

Just use the headings as a guide if you prefer to work more intuitively, or if you favour a certain type of planning method.

networking planner example

group 1 group 2 group 3

what is my aim?

ideal connections (people) - describing words

group name and type

group profile/sector/interests (relevance to me)

tactical group notes/tips - what works well?

my elevator speech (for this group)

what I can do for these people

what do I want from these people?

diary dates/scheduled tasks

targets/expectations

actuals

time spent

compare with my other marketing activities

Obviously alter the box sizes to allow for whatever content you want to insert.

The framework can be extended to manage specific follow-ups.

The example above doesn't necessarily suggest you begin with three groups, or limit your business networking activities to three groups.

A sensible start might be to pick one business networking website, and one face-to-face business networking group or event, and see how you do before increasing the activity.

As you will see from the sustained focused effort point, business networking works best when it is attacked in a concentrated way. If you take on too many groups and websites at the same time you will be spread too thinly, and find it difficult to make an impact in any of them.

7. follow up your commitments and promises

There are two main reasons for the importance of following up:

Networking only produces good results when it is followed up.

Following up with contacts builds trust, reputation, and relationships.

Put negatively, to emphasise the points:

Networkers who meet people and never follow up are wasting their time.

Networkers who never follow up will eventually become known as time-wasters.

Follow up is a matter of relevance and commitment: If a contact or referral is not relevant, then say so, which avoids any expectation of follow up.

If there is relevance, follow it up, in whatever way is appropriate for the situation.

If you find that you are not wanting to follow up meetings and referrals because of lack of relevance then you can re-examine your group targeting strategy. You might be chasing the wrong groups and connections, and could need to redefine these issues.

8. be a positive influence

Be positive. Use positive language. Smile. See the good in people.

Be known as a really positive person. It rubs off on others and people will warm to you for being so.

Keep your emotional criticisms of others and personal hang-ups to yourself.

Speak ill of no-one.

Be passionate and enthusiastic, but not emotional or subjective.

Avoid personalising situations. Remain objective.

Seek feedback and criticism about yourself and your ideas from others. It is the most valuable market research you can obtain - and it's totally free.

Be tolerant. Be patient. Be calm and serene - especially when others become agitated.

Followers gather around people who remain positive and calm under pressure, and who resist the herding tendencies of weaker souls.

At many networking events and situations you will have the opportunity to give a presentation to the assembled group. This is a wonderful chance for you to demonstrate your expertise in your specialist area, your positive confident character, and also to pass on some useful information.

When giving presentations in these circumstances, avoid giving a hard-selling pitch, unless you are sure that such a style is appropriate. Usually it is not. Aim to inform and educate rather than to sell. In many networking situations a strong selling presentation is regarded as insulting by those present. This is especially so if you are a guest of a group that you would not normally meet regularly.

You will sell yourself best by giving helpful information in a professional and entertaining credible manner.

Be confident, positive and enthusiastic, but do not let this develop into pressure on the audience, or a sense of your trying too hard.

Try to find and present within your specialism the most helpful information for the group concerned. Your aim at the end of the presentation is for the audience to have learnt something useful about your area as it applies to them, and to have been impressed with your professionalism and command of your subject.

9. apply sustained focused effort

Business networking is a form of marketing.

All forms of marketing benefit from strongly focused activity, which is necessary first:

to create awareness, and then

to build relationships to the point when a sale can be made.

A given amount of effort will produce much greater results when applied consistently in a strongly focused way, than the same amount of effort spread over several wider activities, especially if spread over time too.

This especially applies to business networking websites, where occasional light involvement has little impact, but focused continuous efforts can achieve a visible profile and build very many connections.

The same principle applies to local networking clubs, where occasional participation rarely penetrates the usual inner core of members, but regular enthusiastic involvement inevitably gains attention.

You should also be continuously open to unplanned networking opportunities, which can arise at any time. Business people are mostly normal human beings just like you. They have social lives, they travel, go to shops, sports events, restaurants, pubs, concerts, etc., and do lots of other things that you do too, quite outside of work. Paths can cross in the most unexpected places. You will find and develop connections in these unplanned situations if you:

make eye-contact with people and smile

take the initiative

start conversations

generally adopt an open friendly approach to everyone

and always carry a pen and some business cards

Thereafter in all cases - planned and unplanned - much depends on what you offer to your connections - again see help others.

Business networking clubs and websites are full of people with many connections but little of value to offer, and they achieve poor results. Good results come instead from being friendly and open, from

taking the initiative, from working hard at sustaining genuinely helpful contributions wherever you meet people.

In face-to-face networking clubs there is often a 'clique culture', in which members are defensive or sometimes seemingly arrogant. This often indicates a requirement to become known and trusted, which takes time and effort. (That said, if there is genuine arrogance, you would be sensible to find a different group.)

Business networking, like any other business activity, requires concentrated effort to produce results.

If you treat networking like an occasional or purely social club it will not produce good business results.

Business networking requires sustained effort to make things happen.

Sustained focused effort does not mean delivering a full-blown sales pitch to every person you meet, and plastering your brochures all around the hotel lobby.

Sustained focused effort means working hard to become a regular active helpful presence in the group.

Build relationships first, your reputation next, and referrals and introductions will follow.

10. life balance

A healthy balance in your life - of work, pleasure, business, social, etc - promotes and gives off a feeling of well-being, which is helpful for networking in many ways:

you will be at ease and relaxed, and this transfers to others

you will be able to engage and respond in lots of ways with lots of people

your life balance will project confidence, which fosters confidence in others

you will demonstrate that you are in control of yourself and your business

people will buy or refer you as a person - not just your business specialism

This particularly applies to referrals and introductions, in which your character reflects directly on the person referring or introducing you.

Being a balanced person enables low stress and a feeling of assurance, which are very useful characteristics in business networking situations, and particularly so if you have aspirations to become a leading member of any of the networks you aim to work with.

Measuring or defining life balance is not easy, but we know it when we see it in others, and we respond to it.

Having good life balance contributes directly to the level of faith people have in you.

And crucially, life balance gives you the strength to absorb problems, to care for others, and maintain vital qualities like integrity, dependability, compassion and humanity.

Conversely when our life slips out of balance for any reason, we have less to give. We have lower reserves of enthusiasm, energy, tolerance, understanding and consideration for others - all essential for growing and maintaining a successful business network.

This prompts an incidental 'lifestyle' tip - for business networking events where alcohol might be available: drink in moderation and keep a reasonably clear head. This is not to say that you should reject all local customs where drinking is involved. In many social business events, including many foreign situations, drinking and eating are a very significant part of relationship-building. Use your judgment. Alcohol to a degree certainly helps many social processes, but taken to extremes tends to be counter-productive.

networking checklist

What goes around comes around.. humankind can't yet explain this scientifically, but it does seem to work. Give to receive. Counter-intuitive to many people, nevertheless it's the fundamental ethos of business networking. Help others.

Use a helpful approach especially on business networking websites. Think: "What can I contribute to this community which people will find truly helpful?" And then work hard to extend that help - whatever it is - to as many relevant people as possible.

Always keep your integrity. Nothing destroys networking like lack of trust. Trust is based on knowing that the other person has integrity.

Ask people: "How can I help you?" and "What can I do for you?"

Understand and use facilitative questioning. See Buying Facilitation. The techniques use careful questions to help people clarify their choices and decisions easier. It's a powerful ethos - applicable widely beyond selling.

Develop a concise and impressive description of who you are and what you do. Aim high. Think Big.

Develop a description of yourself and what you do as a written statement, and as a verbal statement (an 'elevator speech' or 'elevator pitch' - so called because it makes a successful impact in the time you share an elevator with someone who asks: "What do you do?").

Develop slightly different descriptions of yourself for different situations - so that you are as relevant as possible. As you work with these descriptions or 'elevator speeches', you will find that a series of mix-and-match phrases take shape. Continue to refine and adapt these statements. Get feedback from people, and notice what works best, for different situations.

Be different to everyone else - especially your competitors.

Try to see all your competitors as potential allies. There is often not much difference - just a frame of mind. This can be very significant if you are spending a lot of time looking over your shoulder at what your competitors are doing, and not concentrating on building your own business.

Direct all your efforts to growing your own positive activities, and resist losing valuable energy and time and resources combating or worrying about the apparent successes or advantages of others.

Be positive. Use positive language. Smile. See the good in people. Be known as a really positive person. It rubs off on others and people will warm to you for being so.

Keep your emotional criticisms and personal hang-ups about others to yourself. If you hear someone being negative about another person, you will often wonder, "I wonder if he/she says that sort of thing about me too?.."

Some say it's bad Karma to speak ill of another. True or not, why risk it? Saying negative things at the expense of another person brings everyone down. This is the opposite of what business networking requires to succeed.

Be passionate and enthusiastic, but not emotional and subjective. Avoid personalising situations. Remain objective.

Seek feedback and criticism about yourself and your ideas from others. It is the most valuable market research you can obtain - and it's totally free.

Be tolerant, patient, and calm. Particularly when others are agitated. Followers gather around calm people.

Always carry a pen. Always carry a diary. Always carry your business cards. (Or modern electronic equivalents of all three..)

Drink less alcohol than everyone else around you, and if you cannot trust yourself to do this, do not drink alcohol at all.

Keep fit, or get fit, and then keep fit. Success and followers tend to gravitate towards people who take care of their bodies, as well as their thoughts and actions.

As soon as you can, create or have built a clean and clear website for yourself or your business. It is the ultimate universal calling card, brochure, and CV, all rolled into one, and perpetually available.

Only promise or offer what you can fully deliver and follow up. Always aim to under-promise, and then over-deliver.

Take great care with quick electronic messages (texts, messages, emails, etc) - you will be amazed at how many misunderstandings and breakdowns in relationships occur because a message is wrongly interpreted. Check and read twice everything you send.

Always follow up everything that you say you will do, however small the suggestion.

If you accept a referral or introduction to someone always follow it through.

Say "Thank you" to people whenever the opportunity arises - especially to people who get taken for granted a lot.

Be interested in all people. Invest your time, attention and genuine understanding in them.

Understand what empathy really means, and practice it. Look people in the eyes. Listen with your eyes. This is about communicating at a deeper empathic level than business folk normally employ. Very many business discussions are superficial - like a game or a set of dance steps; instead make a determined effort to concentrate and care about the other person. Listen properly.

Find reasons to give positive feedback to people - give and mean it.

Stand up for what's right and protect less strong people from wrong, especially where you see bullying, cruelty, discrimination, meanness, etc. You will hear it everywhere when you step back and out of the crowd.

Networking is about building a wide and relevant network of meaningful contacts - not just having lots of one-to-one meetings. Big strongly connected networks inevitably capture more opportunities than networks with lots of holes and weak connections.

Choose your most trusted and closest associates very carefully - reputations are built according to the company you keep, beyond how you yourself behave.

Target groups and connections that are relevant - which fit your purposes, and you fit theirs.

Don't waste your time on groups and connections that lack integrity or relevance.

Recommendations reflect powerfully on the recommender, therefore: Recommend only those people you are confident will reflect well on you, and always ensure you reflect brilliantly and memorably on anyone who recommends you.

Seek and take opportunities to make a positive difference towards a positive aim (of anyone's) wherever you can - even if some of these opportunities are unpaid and unrewarded in conventional terms. You will learn a lot, create new opportunities for yourself, and develop a reputation for producing good results out of nothing. This is a powerful personal characteristic which people find completely irresistible.

Be clear and realistic about what you want when you are asked. Have a plan.

Research the customs and expectations of foreign cultures before networking with foreign business-people. What is considered normal in your own part of the world could be quite inappropriate in another.

networking - definitions

Definitions can be very helpful in understanding concepts.

This is so in networking.

network

The Oxford English Dictionary definition of a (business) network is:

"A group or system of interconnected things or people."

This is significant when we consider networking in its fullest sense - beyond one-to-one meetings or contacts.

The word network first appeared in English around 1560. It meant, not surprisingly, 'a netlike structure'.

The meaning of 'a complex collection or system' is first recorded in 1839.

These terms derive originally from the net used by a fisherman.

The bigger and stronger the net, the more fish would be caught.

The same with business networks. (The fish represents your aims, for example sales achieved, or new clients.)

Networking goes beyond one-to-one meetings.

Effective networking involves building a strong well-connected network.

If you only take (or sell), your network will be weak. If you mainly help and give, your network will be strong.

To many this is counter-intuitive, but it works.

networker

The Oxford English Dictionary definition of a (business) networker is:

"A person who uses a network of professional or social contacts to further their career."

The word 'career' in the OED definition is somewhat limiting.

In fact networking has for centuries been used in various ways to grow business as well as personal careers, and to make all sorts of projects happen, regardless of the terminology.

The purpose to which the networking efforts are directed can be anything.

The principle of networking is finding and building helpful relationships and connections with other people.

Mutual benefit (or mutual gain) is a common feature in successful networking - and this is a powerful underpinning principle to remember when building and using your own networking methods. It is human nature, and certainly a big factor in successful networking, for an action to produce an equal and opposite reaction. Effort and reward are closely linked.

The expression - "You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours.." is another way to appreciate the principle of mutual benefit.

So is, to an extent, the notion that "It's not what you know; it's who you know.."

The point there is to ask yourself:

"Why would somebody want to know me?"

People may do something for nothing for someone once or twice, but sooner or later some sort of return is expected, even if not openly stated.

This is the principle of reciprocity.

Reciprocity applies very strongly where recommendation and referrals are involved.

Ask yourself:

"Why would someone refer or recommend me?"

This introduces the vital aspects of trust and credibility and integrity.

Would you refer someone you did not trust, to a valued contact of yours?

Other people tend not to either.

Return or reward does not necessarily have to equate precisely to the initial gesture. Importantly, reward is whatever makes sense to the recipient. To some a simple 'Thank you' is adequate. To others something more concrete is required. It depends on the situation, the value of the exchange, and the individuals and relationship history.

Business networking is practised by all sorts of people in work and business, especially through organized networking events and online services.

People who use networking can be employees, self-employed, owner-managers - any role, any level, and any specialism.

Networkers can be buyers and/or sellers, not least because most people are potentially both: most of us want to 'sell' or promote our own interests, and mostly we are all capable of 'buying' or otherwise enabling the interests of others.

Particularly beneficial results can arise from networking when people's interests coincide to produce an effect greater than the separate parts. Networking can be a very helpful way to find such cooperative and collaborative partnerships - based on mutual interest.

A way of understanding this aspect is through the term synergy.

Synergy is a combined effect that is greater than the sum of the two (or more) individual parts.

Synergy between two providers (even competitors) can produce exciting new service propositions, enabling providers to work as associates or through more formal partnership.

Synergistic connections can therefore be a good way for smaller providers to compete effectively with much larger suppliers.

Networking connections which produce this effect are valuable and desirable, so look out for them, and try to build a network which contains these sorts of connections, especially where it strengthens your market offering.

types of networking situations, events and methods

There are many types of networking situations and methods. Far more than you might imagine.

Most people tend to think only of the best known business networking clubs and websites, but business networking can be done virtually anywhere that you find business-people relevant to your aims and capabilities.

This is important when you remember that other professional people outside of the business community can also be very helpful in networking (for example, scientists, lecturers, educators, councillors, etc.)

Here are some of the main examples of situations and methods suitable for business networking, including specially organized business networking events, meetings, activities and systems.

N.B. Many of these are not organized networking activities. Many of these networking situations are simply opportunities to meet people relevant to your aims, when your initiative and creativity can turn vague potential into worthwhile networking.

For all networking opportunities, your success is dependent on the relevance of the situation and the quality and energy of your involvement.

Brief pointers and tips are shown alongside each networking opportunity.

Conferences

Conferences are full of people with common interests. Coffee breaks are an ideal time to make introductions.

Exhibitions

Exhibitions are obviously full of business people with a common interest. Most exhibitions rightly do not like visitors to canvass the exhibitors, but there are plenty of other situations to meet people and network.

Seminars

Seminars attract business people of all sorts. Again there are usually coffee breaks which are ideal for making introductions and getting to know people.

Training courses

Open training courses are excellent for meeting other business people. Many will encourage informal networking among delegates because this adds value to the quality of the event; certain types of training bring people together in work teams, making it extremely easy to get to know all attendees very well.

Chambers of Trade or Commerce

All towns have at least one 'chamber of commerce', specifically to bring local business-people together. Many run networking events and/or other meetings and activities which are ideal for networking.

Breakfast networking clubs

Several companies run regular breakfast networking clubs as their primary business. Other companies will run one-off events to connect with the local business community. These purpose-designed events obviously provide a good opportunity to engage with other business people.

Business networking websites

Since the development of interactive website technology in the late 1990s there are increasing numbers of online business networking organizations. Each has its own culture and systems. Some are vast, covering all types of business imaginable, for example linkedin.com. Others are industry or trade specific, and some are geographically focused. All can be found quickly and easily by searching the web.

Website forums Website forums exist for every subject you can think of. Each offers a networking opportunity for the subject matter concerned.

Website user groups User groups are a further variation of groups found online. User groups are typically within the websites of major internet corporations such as Google and Yahoo. Many user groups are highly specialised, and by implication, internet networking is second-nature to most of these people.

Professional body websites Every profession and trade is represented and connected by at least one official body, which tends to act on behalf of its members, and also offers various opportunities for outsiders to get involved and make helpful connections.

Interactive special interest websites Networking has been made much easier with the advent of interactive membership websites. When you have identified your target groups, there will be a specialist membership website somewhere which represents and brings them together.

Community social websites Facebook is the obvious example. There are many others. Culture and demographic profile are different in each. Some of these websites and memberships are vast. Bigger than countries. This is because of the social aspect, which might initially be appealing, but making a business impact can be very challenging due to the scale of these operations.

Online/mobile communications applications Twitter is the obvious example. New internet platforms like these can grow from nothing to be hugely popular social connection systems in just a few months. Business people can use them to good effect if approached in a very dedicated and technically informed way. Otherwise they can become big time-wasters, so beware.

Local networking events Anyone can set up a networking event, so you can find isolated or more permanent networking operations cropping up at a town near you.

Speed networking events Speed networking is a highly structured type of networking event, in which an organizer (there are several, of varying type and quality) coordinates quick introductions

among a group of typically between 20-40 people. The concept is similar, and probably modelled on speed-dating formats.

Societies and associations

Every specialist subject has its own society or association. These organizations offer various ways to meet their members.

Institutes for industries

Every industry has its own institute or similar. Various events and methods generally exist by which outsiders can engage with the institute's membership.

Lectures and talks

Lectures and talks occur widely, held or promoted by various organizations for all sorts of purposes. Obviously a lecture/talk will attract a common grouping of people interested in the subject concerned.

Universities and colleges Universities and colleges are like little towns in their own right. Some are like quite big towns. They are also now run like big businesses. These communities contain a vast number of very interesting people, many of whom are very relevant to business. For the past twenty years or so, these big educational establishments have been increasingly keen to engage with business people of all sorts. It's a matter of talking to them and discovering what opportunities exist for getting involved.

Hospitality events Corporate hospitality events - a rarer thing in modern times - are typically organized by big corporations to get to know their suppliers and customers better. If you find yourself involved in one of these it will present some of the best conditions for business networking that you will ever experience. Fill your boots, as they say.

Shareholders meetings If you have company shares, especially in a big corporation, you will tend to meet a lot of business people at shareholder gatherings. Many shareholders do not invest just for financial reasons - many invest because they have an enthusiasm for the company's technology or culture, which in some cases can offer a relevant target group for your business networking aims.

Annual General Meetings AGMs are by their nature a regular occasion offered by corporations and membership organizations to engage with its members. Some are very formal and tightly run with little networking opportunities, but others are more sociable affairs, in which case if the group is relevant to your aims, and you can become a member it's worth consideration.

Conventions Conventions are organized for all sorts of special interest groups. If the group is relevant to your aims in any way, then their convention could offer excellent networking opportunities.

Pressure groups Pressure group meetings are strongly connected and usually attended by very active and energized people. If the subject is relevant to your aims there will be opportunities to meet some interesting people at this sort of event. These situations often also have scope for volunteering and becoming involved at a strategic level.

Public meetings Public meetings are held for all sorts of reasons, for example local planning consultations; presentation of local development plans. These events attract business people, especially if the subject relates to commerce, as many will do. At meetings like these, most attendees sit and listen for quite a while, and consequently are ready for conversation during breaks and at the close of the meeting.

Product launches Product launches invariably offer at least one situation when attendees stand and mingle together drinking tea/coffee. Some have receptions afterwards. If you are able to attend one of these events where the subject is relevant to your aims, then you will find opportunities to network. The same applies to book launches and similar publicity events.

Opening ceremonies Opening ceremonies, especially for notable new buildings, attract many local business people and dignitaries. If the community concerned is relevant to your aims this sort of event can provide useful networking opportunities. The same applies to unveiling ceremonies, especially where there is a reception afterwards.

Festivals and shows Festivals are organized for many interests, and naturally attract a large group of people with related involvement, including business-people. Agricultural and county shows are a further example. If the subject is relevant, there'll be networking potential.

Foreign trade visits Local chambers of commerce, regional development agencies, and similar business bodies routinely organize trade missions and gatherings to promote international trade for their region and/or members. Such activities offer excellent networking scope.

Sports clubs Lots of business people enjoy sport, and enjoy mixing sport with business. Golf is the stereotypical example for sports club networking, although all sports, and other special interest clubs, tend to have many business people in their membership. If the group is relevant to your aims and you enjoy the activity concerned, consider becoming a member yourself.

Other clubs Clubs exist for every hobby and interest you can imagine. Instead of sitting at home watching the telly, join a local club that interests you, and meet some new interesting people.

Pubs Not all pubs are good for networking, but some are great, because they are the regular haunts of local business-people. For a very long time indeed, lots of business has been done in pubs.

Trains, boats, planes, etc. Business-people tend to travel around a bit. When you are travelling too, keep your eyes and ears open and be ready to start conversation. Delays are particularly useful for

making introductions. So are long plane and train journeys when you could be sat next to another business person for several hours. Make the most of these opportunities.