



The Nuances of Networking

"Your success often depends as much on who you know as what you know."
-- Unknown

Every day we are presented with opportunities to network.

Successful networkers have the ability to enter a room where they don't know anyone, and make beneficial contacts before they leave.

It would be impossible to overstate the importance of establishing and maintaining an extensive network of contacts. Yet, many people are intimidated by the prospect of networking. The contacts you make today can open doors for you throughout your career.

Opportunities to Network

If you feel nervous about the idea of networking, consider this: You have already been doing it all your life, without stopping to think about it. Everyone you have ever met is part of a network you have already constructed, and it is larger than you think. It is made up of all your friends, neighbors, social club or sports team members, your doctors, dentist, banker, your accountant, as well as any current and former co-workers, customers and competitors. A surprising number of people are part of your personal network.

There are opportunities to network all around you -- even in places you would least expect. You have already found many opportunities to add to your personal network. Now that you are aware of this, you simply have to train yourself to channel your efforts into furthering your professional goals.

Always keep your eyes open for business-related networking occasions. Here are some opportunities for networking *within* an organization:

- **Join business teams.** Volunteer to join, lead or start project teams.
- **Get involved with sports teams.** If your company has any, join in. It doesn't matter at all if you aren't a pro. Learn as much as you can about the activity, arrive equipped, and have fun!
- **"Do" lunch.** This is a great time to get to know your colleagues on a more relaxed, informal basis. Don't eat alone at your desk; if you do, you are relinquishing a good opportunity to network. Besides, everybody needs an occasional break from the office.
- **Look beyond your own position or department.** Volunteer to assist with company-wide events or activities. This is a great way to demonstrate your versatility and team spirit.



- **Volunteer.** Become involved with a charitable organization or cause in your community. Donate your time, not just money. The good feeling you will get from helping others will be a bonus.
- **Attend training sessions.** Yes, the goal is to get new information and/or develop a skill, but it is also a great opportunity to connect with new people.
- **Join organizations and participate actively.** Naturally, it is important to join professional or trade organizations related to your career. But there are many other good opportunities as well, such as participating in programs given by your local Chamber of Commerce, or running for a place on the school board. There are social groups, and those that form around a specific interest, such as investment groups, book clubs and photography clubs. Speak up at meetings, serve on committees and attend the events.

The Business Card: An Important Networking Tool

Always carry an ample supply of your business cards with you *wherever* you go. The business card – in good shape and readily available -- is one of the most important networking tools. Networking can occur anywhere, and it's important that you are ready to capitalize on any such chances. One never knows who they might run into that could be a good business contact -- whether you are in a grocery store, movie theater, plane, elevator, restaurant or conference.

Even if your company doesn't print cards for you, spend some money and have a calling card – name and personal contact information – printed.

If you do make contact with people you want to speak to again, ask for their cards, then give them yours. This way you can make the next move and contact them. Jot down a note or two on the back of the card – where you met, what you talked about, and what you want to do when you return to the office (send them articles, follow up with a phone call, etc.). If they don't have a card, use one of yours, cross out your information (ensuring you don't accidentally give someone else this card), and write their contact details on the back.

Enter all business card information in your database as soon as you return, and, most importantly, do what you promise!

Working a Room

"Working a room" doesn't mean flitting from person to person, pumping hands, and aggressively handing out your business card. It doesn't mean scanning the room for bigger and better opportunities when you are already in the middle of a conversation.

It simply means being alert for networking opportunities. It means keeping your eyes – and your mind – open.



When you are attending a party or event where you know the host or someone else, take advantage of any offers they extend to introduce you to people. If you don't receive any offers, or if there is a particular person or group of people you would like to meet, it is perfectly appropriate to ask for an introduction or introduce yourself.

What if you walk into a party or event and find that you don't know another soul in the room? First, don't panic. Find someone else who is alone, approach that person with a friendly smile, and introduce yourself.

In a large group, approach a person that is alone or in a gathering of three or more people. Two people might be engrossed in a conversation and wouldn't want to be disrupted.

Initiating a conversation can be relatively simple and painless if you prepare ahead. Have your professional handshake and 10-second self-introduction ready. Look the person in the eye. Ask a question or use one of the other suggestions for opening lines offered earlier: an upbeat observation, a pleasant self-revelation or an open-ended question.

You shouldn't worry if your networking attempts don't meet with success every time. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we are going to run into people we genuinely dislike or don't wish to see again. When this happens, the best thing to do is to cut the conversation short in a polite but firm way. "It was nice meeting you, but I must be going now" is a perfectly adequate way to bow out. But no matter how you feel about the person, don't forget to smile and say goodbye.

Making the Contact

You can also initiate a networking exchange by writing a letter, placing a phone call, or sending an e-mail. Which method you choose will largely depend on what feels most comfortable to you. It will also depend on the particular circumstances, your connection to someone who is willing to provide an introduction, and your relationship to the person you are actually contacting. (If you're following up on a referral, be sure to mention the name of your mutual acquaintance at the beginning of your note or call.)

Clearly identify your personal objectives before you initiate contact. Are you hoping for a promotion? A new job? A new customer or client? Then, decide precisely what you would like this new contact to know about you. Make a list of the points you want to cover.

At the same time, don't get so caught up in presenting yourself and achieving your specific objectives that you forget to be a good listener. Be sure to convey a genuine interest in what the other person has to say. If you make a positive impression, there is always the possibility that this new contact may be able to help you in the future. But, first focus on helping him or her.



Following Up

Follow up the initial contact with a brief note. Be sure to express your appreciation – especially if the person provided you with any information or other assistance. If not, just let the person know you are grateful for the time he or she spent talking to you.

Once you have established a connection, find ways to keep it alive. For example, if you see a magazine or newspaper article that might interest the person, it would be a thoughtful gesture to forward it along with a brief note. Acknowledge any awards, promotions, or positive publicity your contact receives with a congratulatory note. Call to say hello or to meet for lunch.

Remember, it is people who constitute a network. Business cards sitting on your desk or names in a database can't do anything to help you. They are just pieces of paper, unless you put in the time and effort to keep the personal connection going. If you do, the results will be more than worth it.

Too often people wait until they need help before making connections. Do it when you need nothing; be willing to help others – they will definitely be there for you.

Effective networking can only enhance your career – adding new clients and, with follow up, building valuable and lasting business relationships.

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