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## essentials for working the room effectively at networking events

*Research into networking events shows that impressions are formed quickly and those professionals who demonstrate interest, warmth and enthusiasm in the people they meet gain the best outcomes.*

***With any networking event you participate in, there is always the challenge of ensuring the time you invest ultimately pays off and helps you achieve the BD goals and targets you have set.***

Time is rarely in a bountiful supply for professionals and so it is important to, not only be selective with the events you support, but also be more proactive in how you approach them.

This Winning Business Digest focuses on how to use your networking to create opportunities for further work-winning conversations with new and current contacts.

# 1 Preparation is the cornerstone of success

Proper preparation will help you to create that vital good first impression with those you meet. So, where possible, find out who the guests are before the event. Such knowledge gives you a chance to do a bit of research on them before you go. Who do you ideally want to meet, and what will you say to them when you do? Identify some potential topics of conversation by quickly scanning relevant business press or current affairs before you go to the function. Impress by being 'current' and sharing ideas and useful information relevant to the nature of the event.

**Try this:** For the next event you attend, obtain the guest list and identify who you want to meet. Then take a look at the website of their organisation, check out their LinkedIn profile and do a Google search on them. This basic research will give you a context for each of those individuals you would like to meet. Think about the questions you will ask and any conversation points you might raise.

*This preparation doesn't take long but can be immensely helpful in focusing your effort on the right people for you and arming you with suitable topics to impress and guide the conversation in the direction you would ideally want it to go, if and when you meet them.*

# 3 Learn the skill of turning social conversations into business ones

Whilst small talk is important to build rapport with people and gain some common ground, your involvement in a networking event is often likely to identify potential business opportunities. It's critical therefore to be able to move social conversations onto a business footing by creating a 'bridge' which links their comments to knowledge you have. Think in terms of sharing ideas and helping, rather than 'selling'. Questions similar to these help you to create such a bridge:

- "I see you are with [organisation] what's your role there?"
- "What's keeping you and your team busy just now?"
- "How do you see the business looking over the next few months?"
- "What trends are you seeing in your sector?"

**Try this:** It is also important to prepare your response to the 'How's business?' question. Use this opportunity to broaden people's minds about what you do. People remember stories and examples more than lists and facts and so think of interesting illustrations of how you have or are helping clients, and the positive outcomes they're gaining as a result. Prepare in advance examples which will most appeal to people when they ask about your current 'business'.



# 4 Recognise the 'light bulb moment' for you

The more open questions (those beginning with what, where, when, why and how) you use in your discussion the more information your contact is likely to share. Think about how you can help them given what they have told you. Your own area of expertise may not always be required, but that shouldn't stop you offering help. Reflect on the information your conversation partner has told you and think about others in your firm or network who could help. Being in a position where you can offer relevant help (even if it is via a trusted colleague or contact) can strengthen the bond between you and the person you've just met. It also gives you a chance stay in touch and explore other opportunities together in the long term.

**Try this:** Keep current with what key contacts in your firm and network are working on. This will help you to identify areas where you can offer help on their behalf when you are at a networking event. This will also encourage reciprocity and more referrals to come your way over time, as well as help you to grow your network and keep in touch with those you meet through networking events.

# 2 Be interested and curious

Take the networking pressure off yourself by showing a genuine interest in the person you're talking with. Focus the conversation on them and ask about their role, their organisation, their holidays, family, interests, their views on current topics, what's keeping them busy just now, what's on the horizon for their sector in the coming year ... etc. Show an interest and enthusiasm in what they have to say; it will help them to reciprocate.

It's easier to start a conversation with a single person as opposed to trying to join a group. If a person is on their own they will welcome someone to talk to. Pick someone who looks approachable and watch for open body language and eye contact.

**Try this:** Practice listening with real attention to people. This isn't always easy in a noisy networking environment but aim to develop the capability to screen out any distractions. Remember the details this person tells you in order to further develop the conversation now and later on. You can encourage them to talk more openly by focusing on what is interesting and important to them. This can often reveal areas of mutual interest (for rapport building with them) as well as issues they're facing (for potential support you could give).







## 5 Create opportunities to keep in touch

It typically takes several personalised interactions with a contact before you have built sufficient trust for them to send business or opportunities your way. If you are talking to a contact who is new to you, this networking event will represent step 1 of that process; and so it is important within your conversations to create opportunities to keep in touch.

### Try this:

*Familiarise yourself with articles, guides, toolkits and other such collateral your firm has produced. These can give you a valuable pool of resources to draw on when trying to keep in touch with people you meet at networking events. Remember that in order to impress them, whatever you send needs to be relevant, interesting and preferably really valuable to them. The more resources you're aware of, the greater the chance you have of finding something appropriate for that individual.*

## 6 Learn to leave elegantly

Whilst you want to have a good conversation with an individual, you don't want to spend the whole event talking to just one person (and they probably don't want to either). Professionals are often nervous about how to leave and move on within a networking environment. Rightly, they do not want to cause any offence to the person they've been talking to.

If you do need to move on, offer to introduce that individual to someone you know, or excuse yourself by going for a drink. Alternatively, suggest that you both join a group or introduce yourselves to someone who is on their own. This enables you to exit with grace and professionalism and doesn't put the person you've been speaking with in an awkward situation.

### Try this:

*Practice using these approaches to enable you to conclude and leave a conversation elegantly:*

*"Is there anyone you would like to meet that I can introduce you to?"*

*"I'm going to get another coffee ... would you like to join me?"*

*"I promised I'd speak to a couple of people here, and I see they've arrived so if you'll excuse me for 10 minutes ... perhaps we can catch up later on?"*

*"I'm conscious I'm taking your time and I'm sure you'll want to network ... do you have a card?"*

*"I should introduce you to my colleague who specialises in..."*

## 7 Follow up where it is appropriate to do so

If you have agreed to a follow up action during the discussion make sure that you do it – research has indicated that if you don't do what you say (even if it is a relatively insignificant action like sending a publication) you will go down in their estimation. You will also be linked emotionally in their mind as someone who doesn't deliver on their promises.

Allocate time in your diary after a networking event to action your follow ups promptly (whilst the person still remembers your conversation). Consider what relevant information the person told you and, if it doesn't relate to your expertise, which of your colleagues or contacts can help. Ensure you have something of value to give or say to the contact you met and diarise any next steps that come from the follow up. This will ensure they get done and you are able to keep the interaction going.

### Try this:

*Make a note of the key points of the conversation with that individual. With their permission at the function, jot down any action you are going to take on their behalf, for example, "Would you mind if I just made a note on the back of your card that I'll send the research report to you, it will remind me to do it tomorrow." Show that you are serious and efficient.*

*If it's not appropriate to jot the actions down there and then, do this immediately after the event – either on the back of their card or in a notebook/smartphone notes section – and whilst the conversation is still fresh in your mind.*

*Research indicates that if you don't do what you say (even if it is a relatively insignificant action like sending a publication) you will go down in a contact's estimation.*





## Summary

Networking events are a great opportunity to develop your network and meet new contacts. The key to ensuring they generate new work opportunities for you over time is to be more proactive in how you approach them. This includes planning your involvement in them and having a broad range of relevant insight, resources and contacts which you can draw on to help you forge stronger relationships with the people you meet.

Be mindful that research into networking events shows that impressions are formed quickly and those professionals who demonstrate interest, warmth and enthusiasm in the people they meet do very well. The key then is to make people feel at ease and be interested and curious in what they have to say. Take subtle control of the conversation by careful questioning and listen and link what you've heard to how you and others in your network could potentially help.

Above all, be current in your knowledge, have a view and create opportunities to stay in touch where it is relevant for both of you to do so.



## 8 Work effectively as a host team to maximise your investment

If you are preparing for your own event – whether it is a seminar, workshop or a corporate hospitality initiative some fundamental principles need to be applied in order to make the most out of your investment of time and money to host the event.


When the guest list is complete, and a couple of days before the event, hold a pre-event hosts' briefing. Identify who knows the guests and which colleagues would like to meet them (so that you have a natural introduction at the event). Use this briefing session to also share the background details of each of the guests so that all of the hosts have a 'snapshot' of the relationship. Also focus on the key messages you would like to get across at the function so that everyone is clear on the 'party line' and make sure that all hosts know the answers to the typical questions the guests are likely to have.

### Try this:

*After the event, make sure that you have a team de-brief as soon as possible. Share what you have heard from the guests, co-ordinate follow up action and update your CRM system. In this way the firm's relationship knowledge is brought up to date and the right individuals are undertaking the appropriate follow up to the conversation and status of the contact.*



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