

Expand Your Network

How to maximize a networking function before and after the event

Many great careers have been built upon a base of relationships developed through networking. Most people turn up to a networking event with the goal of handing out 10 business cards so they can get contacts from the recipients of their cards. They actually miss the deeper value from networking and that is education. There is always an opportunity to learn from the people you meet there and from the speakers featured at these events.

In today's time poor society it is important to maximize your productivity by spending your time wisely and if you are going to use networking as part of your career development strategy, here's what you need to do to do it right.

It is crucial to approach networking with the right attitude. The universal Law of Expectation says we get in life what we expect to get. So, if you go into the event expecting it to be boring or a waste of time it probably will be. However, if you approach the function with the belief you will establish some worthwhile relationships and learn at least one new thing, then guess what? There is an excellent chance that this is exactly what will happen.

Nurture an abundance mentality and always be prepared to help someone and give what you can, whether it is knowledge, referrals or praise. Be an advocate for others because there is plenty of business to go around and the Universal Law of Reciprocity will ensure that whatever you give out will come back to you two-fold.

Prior to attending an event:

- Develop your communication and business skills: The better you become, the better your network results will be.
- Know your objective and target market: This will help you to choose your functions accordingly as some networking functions are more geared toward social networking and others more to business.
- Research: Find out about industry groups, clubs and organizations to determine which ones fit your objectives and profile.
- Know your desired outcome: Know what it is you want to achieve, for example "build the foundation of two new relationships" or "learn one new thing to develop my business knowledge."
- Go through your pre-event equipment checklist: Take business cards, blank cards for people who don't have one, read your local paper and be aware of current events for ease of discussion, your name badge, and your professional presentation.
- Practice small talk and prepare a couple of questions to start conversation (ask something that people can't get wrong such as)...
 - What made you come along today?
 - What's been the highlight of your day?
 - What other networks have you attended?
 - Ask about past highly topical events.
- Practice your 60 second infomercial: **This is a brief outline of you and your "business"**. Be sure to include the emotional benefits of people dealing with you, not just the features of your package. Present it as information rather than as a hard sell.

At the event

- Always arrive at the beginning of registration time and leave well after the advertised finish time, because some of the best networking is done in these time frames.
- Remember, you are not there to sell. You are there to make contacts and build trust. This is a powerful ingredient that makes everything possible and can lead to many rewarding relationships.
- When you are talking to people, be genuinely interested and focus on the person you are talking to. Avoid thinking “new job”. Have a heart to heart conversation and think, “How can I help this person and what can I learn from them?”
- The key to get people talking is to ask open-ended questions that begin with who, when, where, how, what or why. This technique allows you to gain information and avoids you monopolizing the conversation.
- Act like a host, not a guest. Be seen as a centre of influence. Be proactive in approaching people and building groups and facilitate the conversation.

Follow up

It is essential to act on the contacts you have made and the information you have gleaned.

- Collect business cards, record the date met, where you met, their interests, then rate key players with whom you would like to keep regular contact.
- Enter these into a data base.
- Keep a diary to contact within a minimum 7 day cycle.
- After each event, send the people you met a friendly e-mail or note card to reinforce the beginning of the relationship.
- Spend 30 minutes per day on networking follow-ups. This is “Building the Business” and may be in the form of cards, invitations to events, articles of interest (80/20 relevance to them/self promoting) referrals to others or calls.

By following these simple tips before, during and after a networking event you will become a much more valued participant, you will increase your ROI.

Above all, have fun and enjoy meeting the new and interesting people you will come across as you build up your profile in the networking community. Remember, it is not only what you know, it also the people you know and how they relate to you that will contribute to building your career.

Article by Tracy Voyce, courtesy of www.EzineArticles.com

Gary Millar
Tel. (780) 467-6121
Email: gary@millarcom.com



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