

Ten Skills You Need for Effective Networking

Face-to-face business networking is still an essential mechanism for meeting key people, building business and stakeholder relationships, developing partnerships, gaining access to information and resources, finding staff, meeting suppliers, dialoguing with government, and much more.

Yet many people feel awkward in networking situations. Here are ten tips on how to make networking and conversations easy and beneficial.

1. Have a clear goal.

Develop a business networking plan. Work out how you are going to become known to the people that matter. Decide whom you need to meet and work out how to meet them. Then choose the business networking events or meetings that best suit your goals. Don't just go to any networking event and hope to meet relevant people. Go to the events that the people you need to meet will also be attending.

2. Prepare in advance.

Prepare in advance for the conversations you'll have at any event, meeting or conference. Think about what you'll talk about beforehand. You might also find it useful to prepare a line of introduction about yourself that connects you with the event, so you know what to say on introducing yourself to strangers.

3. Fade into groups

If you are at all shy of meeting new people, arrive early at events before huddles form, and when needing to break into a group fade into the space between people. Most groups of people leave spaces between each other. Walk up to a space and wait, usually within about 30 seconds someone will look at you. This means you are in. You can then simply join in the conversation with something as simple as, "Hi. My name is...."

It is much harder to join a group who are standing very close together or who are leaning in. This usually means the conversation is closed.

4. Find a connection and something that you have in common.

There is a built-in danger in attending work related functions – the danger of talking only about work. Instead, you should find topics that create synergy and previously unforeseen connections. You always have something in common with everyone you meet and your task is to find out what this is.

5. Vary the topics you talk about

In essence you can talk about anything. Find topics that are interesting to the person you are seeking to create a networking connection with.

6. Ask open-ended questions.

Often people will kill conversation and close it down by asking questions that elicit a single word response, e.g. "Enjoying the conference so far?" or "Nice wine, isn't it?" or "Been busy?" After the person has said "yes" or "no" it's your turn again.

Instead, use open-ended questions that include plurals. For example, "What are your reactions to ...", or "What kinds of things ..." or "In what ways ...".

Thus, instead of saying "Have you seen the productivity report?" you might ask, "What are your reactions to the productivity report?" Instead of, "What do you do?" you might ask, "What kinds of things does your work involve?" Similarly, rather than, "We need more options for retirees, don't we?" you might ask, "In what ways are you accommodating the baby boomers?"

7. Talk about yourself.

Be willing to talk about yourself. Tell people things about you that they can't guess from looking at you. But don't overdo this. Talk about your personal experiences that create shared connections. Trust can also be built through a willingness to share.

8. Take your business cards everywhere.

Take lots of business cards with you wherever you go. You never know when the opportunity will arise to swap cards. You can even carry blank cards with you; so if people don't have theirs you can still keep their details.

9. No lame excuses.

Avoid lame excuses when you exit from someone. "Is that the time?" and "I'm just going to get another drink" are boring. Thank them instead. It leaves a far better impression.

10. Keep in touch.

The biggest mistake people make when business networking is not re-contacting people. Stay in touch. Choose ways that suit the people involved, e.g. having coffee together, sending a card, sending them a referral, inviting them to an event at your organization, sending a report or connecting them with someone in your network. Whatever you do, re-contact them. This is how business relationships grow and prosper.