

NETWORKING BEST PRACTICES

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INTRODUCTION

Adapted from an article by Gina Bell, Networking Masters International

Today, networking is more important than ever. Networking really is about so much more than just meeting new people. When you discover that networking includes exchanging referral partners, forming strategic alliances, exchanging information, making introductions, providing recommendations, and establishing friendships then you'll be anxious to get going right away.

You can give yourself a competitive advantage by effectively preparing for the networking meetings and events you will be attending. A little prep work is the key to increased confidence and getting the results you want from your networking effort. Here is a networking checklist that might help.

PREPARE YOUR “NETWORKING TOOL KIT”

TWO NICE PENS

Your pens should look nice because people do judge by what they see... a nice professional looking pen is an easy way to convey a professional approach to business networking. You need the second pen in case one runs out.

BUSINESS CARDS

Make sure you take enough business cards to go around. Your business card is one of the most cost-effective marketing tools around... make good use of them by NOT being miserly with them.

PROFESSIONAL NAME TAG

Wear this on your right side so that it is highly visible when people shake your hand. Tip: Tuck a yellow highlighter in your purse or pocket to use on sticky “Hello my name is:” name badges. Your name will pop and people will ask how you did that... it’s a great conversation starter.

SMALL NOTEPAD

A small notepad allows you to document important notes, reminders, dates, etc. Make note of any important information you learn about your new contacts as well as planned follow up ideas.

NOTE CARDS & STAMPS

Keep several note cards and stamped envelopes in your jacket or pocket book, or even the glove box of your car. Jot a short personal handwritten note to your new contacts and drop the cards in a mailbox BEFORE you get home; this way it’s sure to get done. Think about the impact you’ll make because almost nobody does this.

BUSINESS CARD HOLDER(S)

Have one card holder just for your own business cards and a separate multi-page card file filled with the business cards that belong to your existing network contacts you usually refer to other people. This accomplishes two important things: 1) you won’t mix up the cards and accidentally give your new contact someone else’s business card, and 2) you look very professional when you have an established network of professionals that you refer to. Your new contacts will be wondering... how do I get my cards in that folder?

PREPARE YOURSELF

A POSITIVE ATTITUDE

You're probably thinking this is simple common sense, right? Wrong! You'd be surprised at the number of Negative Ned's and Nellie's who attend networking functions hoping to grow their business. Note: Successful Networkers are memorable – in a positive way! Even if you are having a bad day, put a smile on your face. A nice smile is the best greeting of all; it puts others at ease. A smile makes you appear more approachable; you look more attractive, happy, confident, and self-assured. Don't forget to use a firm handshake. Saying hello with a confident handshake speaks volumes.

YOUR ATTENTION

Be respectful by remembering to turn off your cell phone or BlackBerry when you arrive at the event. Disrupting a meeting with your phone going off sends a very negative message to the other attendees.

YOUR APPEARANCE

I'm sure you've heard the phrase, "You only get one chance to make a good first impression." Make sure you're presentable. You don't want people to know what you ate for supper. Be sure to dress for the occasion. If you are attending a business breakfast, make sure you aren't planning to attend in your blue jeans. Did you know that accessorizing has been proven to increase perceived status? Make sure that shoes are polished (especially the heels), are in good shape, and match what you are wearing.

YOUR INTRODUCTION

Have your 30-Second Commercials rehearsed – one commercial for each type of person that you are introducing yourself to. A business owner may not be interested in the same points that a director would be. A well thought out and rehearsed response to the inevitable question: "So, what is it that YOU do?" is an absolute MUST.

Your "verbal logo" should be memorable and meaningful; it should grab the listener's attention and leave them wanting to know more. This is your verbal business card. Use numbers in your verbal logo; they make the abstract real and increase the believability of your message.

Think about magazine covers. They are found in the most high traffic and compulsive buy areas of a store – right by the checkout counters. Their headlines need to grab your attention fast, and they do (i.e. *44 Things Teens Don't Want Their Parents to Know and Why!*). Notice, this headline format makes you anxious and curious – immediately you wonder just what are the 44 things teens don't want parents to know and why?

Use specific phrases in your verbal logo that demonstrate the exact results you can generate. Tie what you do to time, money, love, or health and you will trigger an emotional response. Describe what need you can satisfy. Your message is not about you; it's about what you can do for them.

Provide a description of the types of people or businesses you work with. This provides immediate visual and relatable information for the person you are speaking to. The odds are much higher that they will become a referral source or connect you with complimentary professionals if you paint a clear and memorable picture with words.

Do not label yourself using your job description. You risk being labeled based on the person's past experience with others in your industry. These experiences could be good or bad – you just never know. Never start selling when you've just made first contact! It's an instant turn off. Make sure your new memorable response to the inevitable question rolls off your tongue – so practice, practice, practice!

Think of ways to start conversation BEFORE you go to a business meeting or event. You will need an inventory of opening questions, get to know you questions, and small talk topics. Practice them in front of the mirror so that you feel comfortable saying them. The key is to use open-ended questions which require more than a one word answer.

EXAMPLE OPENING QUESTIONS

- Do you find these meetings helpful to your business?
- I'm new here. What can you tell me about this group?
- Hi! I don't think we've met yet...my name is..., and you are?
- What brought you to this meeting?
- That's a great pin (suit, scarf, purse...etc), where did you get it?

EXAMPLE GET TO KNOW YOU QUESTIONS

- Where are you from?
- How do you keep yourself busy when you aren't working?
- Where do you work?
- What is it that you do?
- How will I know if I meet someone that could use your product/service?

Notice that these get to know you questions focus on the person you are speaking with rather than the organization or event itself.

THE ART OF SMALL TALK

According to Susan RoAnn, author of *What Do I Say Next?*, small talk is a way to connect in situations where "big talk" – murder, war, famine, religion, and politics – may not always be appropriate.

Not everyone wants to hear our views on the latest political headlines at a museum fund raiser for students of the arts. The big issues are important, but we must know the right time or place for them. Small talk is what we do to build to big talk. It is what cements relationships and success.

EXAMPLE SMALL TALK TOPIC IDEAS

- Current Affairs
- Best-selling Books
- Movies
- Business News
- Industry Trends

Consider your personal interests and areas of expertise to come up with additional topic ideas. Start and develop a journal of interesting topic ideas for future reference.

Good resources for small talk topic ideas are:

- Local, National, & International News (Paper, TV, Website, Radio)
- Magazines (Traditional and Online)
- Books
- Movies

Why worry about small talk? Small talk in conversation allows you to find common ground, something in common to spark a connection. This is the fuel that opens the door to establishing rapport and building trust.

BE SURE TO LEAVE/ARRIVE EARLY

The early bird gets the worm! Leave early so that you arrive 15 to 20 minutes before the event officially starts to allow for proper networking time.

START WITH THE END IN MIND – SET GOALS

Start with the end in mind – Define your purpose for attending each event. Ask yourself: “Does this event/meeting fit with my business goals? Can I make quality connections by attending?” Once you’ve determined the time/cost investment is worthwhile, determine a specific number of quality connections you would like to make at each event. Two or three is a realistic goal for most.

Tip: When setting goals, they should always be **SMART**:

- a) **Specific**
- b) **Measurable**
- c) **Attainable**
- d) **Realistic**
- e) **Time-bound**

DURING AN EVENT

MAKE STRATEGIC INTRODUCTIONS

The first thing you need to do once you've arrived at a meeting or event (especially if this is your first experience with this particular group/event) is to introduce yourself to the host, or an obvious member/coordinator, and tell them you are new and would appreciate it greatly if they could introduce you to a few people. Depending on the number of introductions you get, doing this one thing can completely remove the need to introduce yourself to any other strangers. Make sure you deliver a confident and polished commercial, use your conversation and small talk ideas, and don't forget to smile!

SEEK OUT NEW PEOPLE

Resist the urge to visit with people you already know! It is human nature (and all about comfort level) to be drawn to something or someone that is familiar, however, when it comes to networking, this is the absolute quickest way to squash the potential to generate results from your networking time. The goal of networking is to increase your network by meeting NEW people. Put that smile on your face, remember the list of conversation starter ideas, and go for it!

LISTEN AND ASK QUESTIONS

You have TWO ears and ONE mouth, use them proportionately! Learning to ask questions and listening closely to the answers is one of the most valuable skills you will want to develop when it comes to business networking and effective business communications in general. Start with the five "W" questions: Who, What, When, Where, and Why. The answer to each of these questions will provide a lot of information about what your new contact does and will make it much easier for you to refer business to them and provide added value in the future (i.e. invite them to a networking event, send interesting information or articles, make an important introduction, etc...)

ACT LIKE A HOST, NOT A GUEST

This is one of the best strategies for those who are hesitant to introduce themselves to total strangers. There is an obvious difference between the behavior of a guest and that of a host. If you were the event or party host, wouldn't you introduce yourself to people you didn't know and introduce them to others? Wouldn't you make sure your guests knew where to hang their coat or where to get a food/beverage? Of course you would!

A host is much more active and is focused on doing things for others. A guest typically sits back and relaxes. There is nothing stopping you from choosing one behavior or another. A great opportunity for you to learn by example is to get involved with your local Chamber of Commerce as an ambassador or visitor host. Their job is to greet visitors and introduce them to others.

CREATE REASONS TO RECONNECT

Don't leave the event without a plan to reconnect with the people you've met. Some ideas:

- Invite them to parties and networking events
- Mail or email magazine articles you know they'll enjoy or relate to their industry and past conversations,
- Call or email just to see how they're doing
- Arrange a 3-way lunch to introduce two new friends
- Email a link to an interesting website
- Forward a photo
- Recommend a book
- Pass on a newsletter

You get the idea. Find ways to reconnect and be the connection for others. You'll improve your top of mind status and be more memorable.

RELAX AND ENJOY YOURSELF!

Make the decision to enjoy your networking experiences. A positive attitude and willingness to learn and improve will take the weight of the world off your shoulders.

AFTER AN EVENT

Update your database (Salesforce.com, Outlook, etc.). Don't just enter their contact information, but remember to enter notes about them as well. These notes might include people you know in common, interests, other events, as well as any needs that you might be able to help them with down the road. Schedule a follow-up "stay in touch" phone call in the next 30 days or so as a reminder. Include the date and function where you met, info about children, pets, vacations, and how you followed through.

A quick note or email message following an event will help keep you top of mind. Make sure your follow through message is about them and their business, not a sales pitch for yours. Virtually no one else is doing this! It's natural during conversation to have ideas and make suggestions. If you said "I know someone who..." put a call in to the person who wasn't there, suggesting a 3-way lunch. If you mentioned that you read an article, make a copy, jot a note, and pop it in the mail. If you talked about a service that someone else needed, fax through a flyer with a note of endorsement.

One of the primary purposes of networking is to build credibility so that people will refer others in their network to you. Follow through action makes you credible.

Did you know that you can put your follow-up plans on autopilot using your CRM system? A good keep in touch strategy can win clients long after your first meeting. Recent statistics indicate more than 50% of business professionals give up on their prospects too soon!

Think about adding value to each new contact and becoming known as a powerful resource for others. When you are a strong resource, people remember to turn to you for suggestions, ideas, names of other people, etc. This keeps you visible and endears you to others – remember, what goes around comes around!

ABOUT CFS

Criteria for Success is a source for selling solutions that unlocks your company's potential. Our unique approach to selling takes both a philosophical and mechanical approach to improving your sales efforts. In other words, we work to change mindsets and procedures to assure optimal success.

OUR SERVICES

- Strategic Sales Consulting
- Implementing Sales Technologies
- Sales Team Training
- One-on-one Coaching



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