

Tips for a Strategic Approach to Developing Networks and Relationships

- *Be clear on your reasons for networking* and determine what your goals are, then write them down. Re-visit these goals before you attend each networking event
- *Don't go to events with the sole intention of making a sale or getting your business card into as many people's hands as possible.* Everyone is, or knows, a potential client or valuable contact.
- *Clarify what business you are in and come up with a short, simple way of explaining this.* Try to phrase your short statement in terms of what benefit you deliver – rather than just what you do
- *Maintain a good diary system* (for scheduling time to attend events), remembering to schedule the time required to travel to and from the event as well as for follow-up phone calls, coffee meetings and so on. After each event diarise follow-up calls, reminders and advance notes about who to catch up with at the next event.
- *Create systems for tracking contacts* from each network and event (to keep in touch and help build relationships).
- Read the newspapers and a few business magazines to *develop a bank of conversation topics*, but steer clear of religion, politics and other potentially controversial subjects. You could even create an “oh really?” file with interesting stories about business, science and general interest. Look for articles that people will enjoy hearing or be fascinated by and want to tell others. The occasional (clean) joke never goes astray either!
- *Choose networks that fit with your interests and area of business and some others that cover a broader reach.* You don't always want to do business with those in your industry.
- If you have limited time it is preferable to *attend one or two networks regularly*, rather than try to spread yourself over a number of networks irregularly.
- *Maximise your involvement within each network* - Offer to become involved in the network through volunteering for committees, submitting articles for newsletters and websites, assisting on the registration desk or offering door prizes at events.
- *Arrive at events early* and take the time to meet other ‘early birds’.
- *SMILE!!* Look approachable; no one will come near you if you have your head buried in the newspaper or look like you just swallowed the taxi driver for breakfast!
- *Don't be afraid to say hello*, chances are the person you meet is just as nervous as you.
- At sit-down events, try to sit with people you haven't met before. *Try to get the whole table involved in a discussion*

- *Aim to make one or two great contacts at each event*, anything more than that is a bonus. Networking is like making friends – relax and enjoy meeting new people, the business will flow later. As Stephen Covey says “Seek first to understand and then to be understood”
- *Look beyond their business and focus on the person*. Remember that networking is about people not just business – business may follow but the important thing is the amazing person you may be about to uncover.
- *Ask for business cards if you really want to stay in contact*, don’t wait for an offer and only ask if you intend on staying in touch.
- Listen, listen and then listen some more! *Treat everyone you meet with respect and integrity*. Focus on that person completely, not on who else is in the room.
- Circulate with respect. *Be aware of body language and join conversations politely*.
- *Get to know the host*.
- *Know when to back off with integrity*. Follow your instinct. There are many ways to politely excuse yourself without being rude.
- *Follow up and deliver what you promise – always*.
- *Refer your contacts freely and confidently* without expectation of anything in return. Also be honest with the person you are referring your contact to if you haven’t worked with them before. Just introduce them and the rest is up to them.
- Bring people with you – *invite new contacts from other sources as a guest to your network’s events*. If they enjoy the event they will always remember you and may even invite other colleagues who they will introduce to you.

Networking is essential for personal growth, business contacts and referrals – not to mention sanity in an increasingly busy world. Treat networking as an essential part of your business strategy and not just something you do on the side, if you have time. Choose a couple of networks and, for the greatest benefits, get involved as much as you can. Attend events armed with your success tools and a big smile! Don’t keep score of referrals and keep an open mind about everyone you meet. You never know who they know! Finally, follow your instincts and if someone doesn’t feel right just move on without needing to discuss your reasons with anyone else. Remember, what goes around comes around.

Good luck and happy networking!

Kim McGuinness is managing director of Network Central and co-author of Network or Perish – learn the secrets of master networkers. Network Central runs many events such as the Businesswomen’s Breakfast Series, Dynamic Business Series and Thinking Parents Forum. For more information go to www.networkcentral.com.au