

Network with confidence

How to get the most out of your networking activities.

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You're Connected!™

For those of us who work alone or with a small staff, outside contacts and referral resources are vital to the success of our businesses. I have always regarded business networking as one of the best and most useful marketing tools available to any professional. Done well, with intent and planning, consistent networking activities can plant the seeds that grow into life-long business relationships and referral sources.

Put simply, business networking is the practice of making mutually beneficial connections. It is a way for any business professional to increase his or her area of influence and help generate long-term results. It's not easy though and takes a great deal of work and planning to do it well. That's why for some people, networking is little more than a social activity, zipping around from one after-hours event to another, collecting an arm's length of names and business cards at a trade show, or just a place to grab a free lunch. They are really missing out.



Although I've always helped my clients and associates understand the importance of networking, what I didn't realize, however, was how few people really know how to do it successfully. Some people don't know how to do it at all.

I recently presented a series of lectures on the subject of strategic business development techniques. As part of each discussion, I decided to see how well my audience performed in a typical networking situation. During one of the lectures, I gave the group 30 seconds to introduce

themselves to someone sitting nearby and find out whatever they could about them in that short time frame.

Each party was supposed to ask and answer questions effectively in order to obtain the most pertinent and beneficial information. The questions were of their own devising, I did no prompting as to what they would ask or what the responses would be.

To me, the exercise seemed like something right out of a 100-level business class. On the first attempt, however, I was amazed to learn, out of 35 people, that only two even offered a

business card and most could not even remember a first name, let alone any important details.



These results demonstrated to me, and my class, just how unprepared people were to gain any value from a networking activity. After all, why attend chamber of commerce or other networking events if you don't even know what to say or how to present yourself?

To be fair, most people don't get a course on networking in business school. It's a very specific set of learned skills that grow with practice and experience. Plus, some personalities are just better suited to it than others. With that in mind, here are a few pointers that can help.

First, go in prepared! Create and rehearse an, "elevator speech," or what Business Network International (BNI) used to refer to as the "60-Second Commercial." This is a one-minute presentation that identifies you, your business and even outlines a product or service – all in fewer than 60 seconds. It's quick and informative and, once completed, leaves you ready to listen rather than speak.

The average person speaks at about 120 words per minute, so you should be ready with no more than 100 words, providing a built-in buffer for nervousness. Practice it before you attend an event.

Here's a word of advice on practicing your elevator speech – don't use a mirror. Using a

mirror to rehearse a talk is distracting and counter-productive. Mirrors cause us to focus on the wrong things – like that pimple you just noticed on your nose or that your tie doesn't match your shirt, even when it probably does. Mirrors make us too critical of our appearance and we lose sight of the goal – to rehearse and memorize the words until they fall from the lips as easily as saying your name.

Always dress for success, but be aware of the setting and don't overdo it. For most after-hours events, business casual is a good bet for men and women alike. But guys, you'll never go wrong in a nice business suit and tie. No sweats, hoodies, jeans or t-shirts and avoid items with conflicting logos or markings that do not pertain to *your* business. (For more on this subject: <http://geryldeer.com/the-branding-challenge-displaying-only-your-logo/>)



When you arrive, look for a check in or welcome table. If you were asked to RSVP, there may be a protocol or agenda you'll need to know. If the person who welcomes you does not do so, ask if you might have an introduction to the host, or hosts, to pay your respects. This is a great way to make sure you are remembered by the organizers and get to know them for your own purposes as well.

If there is a map or other guide, such as for a trade show, make sure to get a copy as soon as you arrive. Use it to familiarize yourself with the layout and use other key information available to identify any specific attendees you'd like to meet. Whenever possible, try to plan this list before you arrive so you have a sort of "battle plan" already in mind. Also, make sure to say a brief, "hello" to people you already know, but your priority should be to spend the bulk of your time making new introductions.

Now, I can't stress this next piece of advice enough, so read it carefully... twice – **BYPASS THE BUFFET!** Regardless of where you are or when you think your next meal will come, avoid eating during the event. Focus on your job. Let other people sample the cuisine. Having a soft drink or bottle of water is fine, but there is nothing worse than trying to talk to someone at one of these things while they masticate a chunk of Buffalo wing.

Along those same lines and I know this will be an unpopular statement but, no matter how much you like the fancy, craft beer they're serving, avoid alcoholic beverages at all costs. It is still a mystery to me why alcohol is so prominent at networking events, but it is and it should be avoided by anyone who is there to work rather than socialize - that includes wine and liquor. Need convincing? Ask yourself, would you drink at a business meeting or during a sales presentation? Probably not and the same decorum applies here.



Think of yourself as the host of the event rather than a guest. If you were hosting, you would likely not be feeding your face or spending time at the bar. You would probably also feel less awkward about starting up a conversation, so imagine it's your party and you want to make a good impression.

Next, think of networking as if you were a detective. Your entire goal here is to gather information and make connections, so treat it like you're trying to solve a mystery. Carry a notepad and pen with you.

Write down whatever you need to that might help you remember details about each contact you made. If possible, try not to start making notes until you step away from the person. Writing things down while they are speaking will make things awkward and conspicuous.

If available, wear a professionally-made name tag or badge. If you don't have one, get one. A professional-looking nametag is not a deal-breaker, but it will stand out amidst a sea of "Hello, my name is..." lapel decals. For just a few dollars to your favorite promotional products provider or the local office supply chain store, you can get a professional-looking, engraved name pin that identifies you.



Be careful, however, to make sure your name is large enough to read from a short

distance away and avoid distracting graphics and large logos. Keep it simple and professional.

Also, wear the name tag on the right breast pocket area. Most people shake hands with the right hand and the eye is drawn automatically to that area as you greet someone.

Props make good ice breakers but it's usually best to keep your hands free (another reason to avoid the food.) You'll want to have clean hands, a firm grip and be ready to give a handshake, offer a helping hand, accept a piece of literature, or be ready to write down important information.

Make sure you have plenty of business cards and don't be stingy with them! This was one of the biggest mistakes made by marketing lecture participants. It's usually best not to offer a business card, however, unless one of two things happens: the other person offers you hers or they specifically ask for your card. I know it seems confusing, but there is a sort of unspoken protocol to the passing of business cards that could literally take up an additional essay. Suffice to say, this is why you should carry a notebook and pen, just in case you don't get a business card.

Hopefully you will have some good conversations, but be cautious about letting any one individual keep you tied up. Keep moving and don't let any conversations last more than 10 minutes or so. You're doing the other people a favor too, believe me.

Finally, be confident and be yourself. Even if you don't feel particularly confident, you need to at least look like you do. Sometimes people feel very self-conscious in large groups but try to remember that people aren't really staring at you, you just think they are – and some of them are feeling just as out of place. You are a professional in your field, you really do belong there.

If you're worried too much about impressing people or trying too hard to apply these techniques, you might come off a little contrived. Try to relax. Go outside for a moment and take a deep breath.

If you still feel nervous, imagine everyone in their underwear – no, don't do that.



Networking Tips ...



1. Arrive Prepared
2. Dress for Success
3. Skip the Buffet & Alcohol
4. Wear a professional nametag
5. Bring Business Cards
6. Be Confident!

Actually, picturing everyone in their skivvies does little more than make you laugh. Then again, if you've been to some of the same kinds of events I have, the imagery would make it tough to fight back a smile. Of course, smiling is always a good thing - it will attract people to talk to you!

You can apply all of this advice to virtually any networking activity, whether it's a weekly BNI gathering or a one-off chamber event. Naturally, there is much

more to cover regarding follow up after one of these events, but that will have to wait for another essay. In the meantime, get out there and get networking!



Editorial Note: *The preceding essay was originally written in March of 2008 by Gery L. Deer as an “educational moment” piece for the Greater Dayton Professionals BNI chapter in Dayton, Ohio. During his tenure as the chapter’s education coordinator, Gery created original content and distributed the material in “article” format to his membership. Each topic was designed to accompany a three-minute presentation at every meeting. For more information and other tips on business and marketing, visit the GLD Enterprises Communications website at www.gldenterprises.net.*