

Networking – Love it or Hate it?

Some of you are regular attendees; others not sure and others again absolutely hate it. I have always networked and passionately believe in its value. When working in the telecoms sector and establishing an office here in the South West, I gained at least one third of my business through networking. And, equally important, those customers remain loyal and don't get whisked away when the next 'too good to miss' telesales call comes in – so long, of course, that you have 'done what you say on the tin' and given them the very best customer journey. So do give it a try. I've jotted down a few pointers to help you:

1. Consider how many networking groups you join. Whilst the cost of a breakfast isn't huge, the time can mount up over a month, so you need to be selective and support perhaps 2 or 3 groups, plus your own professional network(s).
2. Get there early/exactly on time and bring plenty of business cards with you which are easily accessible. It's much easier to enter an almost empty room than one really full and busy. Have your own badge with you just in case yours has been missed or the name is wrong etc.
3. Be approachable and talk to people! After all that's what it is all about. Approachability derives from the Latin verb *appropriare* which means 'to come nearer to', so remember this applies to you and the person with whom you're talking ... you want to create relationships which can be followed up. There's no hard sell on the day and remember no one is there to buy!
4. Practise your 60 second summary of what you do and how you help the people you work with...
 - o I work with....
 - o Who has a problem with...
 - o What we do is...
 - o So that...
 - o Which means...Give them the benefits of what you offer and above all keep it short. Remember, you are not that interesting!
5. Try to take a quick look at the delegate list to see if there is anyone particular on the list you would like to make contact with. Check with the desk during registration to see if he/she has arrived yet and ask them to point him/her out if need be.
6. Think about your body language and try to adopt an open and approachable posture to attract others to talk to you. Don't cross your arms, no matter how tired you are! Never, ever pre-judge.
7. It's much better to have had a good chat with a few people than a 3 minute conversation with lots; you won't remember them, nor they you; be passionate about your business and avoid the use of the answer 'fine'. How's business? 'fantastic' / 'amazing' is so much more powerful than 'fine'! Ask lots of open questions to encourage conversation. Be interested in the people you meet and remember the old adage: "two ears and one mouth" – use them in that proportion!
8. If it's a seated event, try to annotate the cards you've collected as soon as you sit down – add something which will remind you of that person – visually/something they said/flashy tie/doesn't matter what so long as it's a memory jog; then when back in the office always write on the card the date/venue where you met them. If putting their details then into your data

base, add these memory jogs here too. If you've promised to follow up with something specific, jot this down on the card too.

9. If you have a commitment to follow-up with someone do it within a couple of days of the event whilst still fresh in your mind (and theirs) with a quick email or phone call. If you do a lot of networking, then perhaps consider a business postcard or folded overprinted notelet to 'stand out' from the standard two-line email. I was sent once a great follow up from a national IFA but two flaws – it was written upside down and there were no contact details attached. What a waste – in fact more than that – it lessened my confidence in the contact.
10. If you have time, consider how the person you met is most likely to want to be communicated with - think about where they fit in with the behavioural/disc quadrants and contact accordingly.
11. If you are sending an email follow up, check your email signature to see that it's complete. You need:
 - o First name and surname
 - o Title
 - o Company name
 - o Strapline/few words about what you do
 - o Landline
 - o Mobile
 - o Email address
 - o Website
12. When you make contact, suggest a follow up meeting to find out more about their business and for them to find out more about yours.
13. When you receive an email from a new contact, make sure you update your 'contact' details on your PC, eg outlook contacts. Personally I copy all details from an email signature and then paste onto a new contact and then populate the appropriate boxes accordingly.

You get out of networking what you're prepared to put in. Building up a network can become one of your best marketing strengths and can help to generate regular referrals. Enjoy it.

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