

Connect: Turning complete strangers into profitable referral partners

Effective networking is more than just turning up at an event and handing out as many business cards as possible. It's about building relationships based on a genuine wish to help others succeed. This article explains how.

When we go out into the big wide world of networking, we want to make a good first impression. We will be judged on what we are wearing, what we say, how we say it, our mannerisms and the expressions on our face.

But more than that, any lasting impression will be based on the conversation we've had with someone and whether they feel we're genuine in our interest in them or are just after their business.

If we can help other people in some way, they will think positively of us. We do that by establishing relationships. By getting to know them, learning what makes them tick and finding out what they need. Then the trick is to get in and help them.

Of course, they may not need anything remotely like the services your business provides.

But you have a wide network of people and companies who have products and services that could help your new "friend". So, when meeting and talking with them, don't think just your own business, think of all the others you know, too.

Dr Ivan Misner, BNI's founder, however says it's not the number of contacts you make that's important, it's the ones you turn into lasting relationships. Help any one of those people and they won't forget.

So, how do you go about deepening those new and existing relationships?

1. Give your clients a personal call. Find out how things are with them, and how the project you last worked on with them has gone. While it's acceptable to ask if there's anything else you can do to help, don't ask for referral.
2. Personally phone everyone who has helped you or referred business to you. Ask them how things are going and try to learn about their current activities so you can refer business to them.
3. Put together a list of 50 people you'd like to stay in touch with over the next 12 months. Include people from steps 1, 2 as well as any prospects you've connected with recently. Take some action to keep in touch – this could be a greeting or thank you card, a copy of a magazine they might be interested in, an article you found that relates to their business or anything else you think would be well received.

4. Two weeks after you've sent the material or cards, give them a call and see what's happening with them. If they're past clients or people you've talked to before, ask them who they know who could benefit from the same high level of service you've given them. If you haven't done business with them, find out what they might need in the way of services that could be provided by someone in your network.

Whenever you meet someone new, follow-up is hugely important. I try to drop that person a card the next day saying I'd like to meet them again and suggesting a coffee. Often they will call or email me in response and things go from there.

The problem is though that we're all busy. And it's very easy not to do the follow-up. But if you don't, you have no hope of establishing a relationship with that person and will have wasted your time in even attending the event.

Ivan Misner calls this social capital, which he describes as the international currency of networking, especially business networking.

If you take as much care in raising and investing your social capital as you do your financial capital, you'll find the benefits that flow from these intangible investments will not only be rewarding in themselves but will multiply your material returns many times over.

When meeting people for the first time, how do we go about planting the seeds for a lasting relationship?

- Ask the right questions. Not ones that try to qualify them as a potential client. People see through them. Instead, ask questions that demonstrate your genuine interest in the other person and their business. Questions like:
 - How long have you been in your business?
 - What got you started in it?
 - What kind of clients do you typically work with?
 - Where are you located?
 - What's your geographic coverage?
 - What are some of your biggest challenges?
- Offer free professional advice. Acknowledge the person may not be currently in the market for your services, but demonstrate your knowledge and your willingness to share information.
- Provide a direct referral or a solid contact your new colleague may be able to use at some point in the future.

Focus on the relationship itself rather than on what you might get as a result of knowing this person.

3 reasons why this is a good method of networking:

1. Less stress: you'll feel less pressure to get more immediate business from the networking functions you attend
2. More fun: as you're not concentrating on trying to gain business, you'll enjoy yourself more. Take the time to meet people who you might not otherwise gravitate towards. And you never know who someone might know – don't let appearances fool you.
3. Getting more clients than you can possibly handle: people will gravitate toward you because they can see you're genuine.

The most successful networkers usually have 6-12 people in their inner circle, which bring them most of the business they need and provide a steady, high quality supply of new contacts and prospects.

Once you've established this inner circle, make it priority to meet with a member of that group at least once every other month. That way you can keep in touch with what they're doing and they know what's going on with your business.

So, when you're networking, you need:

- To have the right attitude
- To ask the right questions
- To follow up
- To find reasons to stay in contact
- To help others before expecting anything back

If you can master these techniques not only will business come flooding in the door but your enjoyment in your work will increase hugely.