

Top 10 tips for effective face-to-face networking

Networking is natural. No really, it is. Human beings are social animals, endlessly fascinated about each other, endlessly delighted at the infinite variety that we show in our deeds and our dreams. From a business point of view, networking is the new marketing. Automated word-of-mouth is a key means of creating attention and gaining customers, so the burgeoning conversational world of social media, instant messaging and blogs is critical. But my focus for this article is to emphasise the need for face-to-face communication and networking as this is the aspect that people fear the most. You cannot hide behind a device; you are out there in real time trying to make connections. With face to face networking, the investment in time is constant and the rewards are intermittent and unpredictable.

Like insurance, networks need maintaining over the long term. You can't insure for an event after it's happened. It's the same with networking. Do it while you don't need it. Do it all the time. Make friends while you can; you can't invent them when you suddenly need them. So, why are we all so scared about talking to other people?

Imagine the scenario –and you can because we have all been there. You are at a business seminar or similar event. You arrive, check-in, collect your badge...and immediately go and sit down. You make yourself as inconspicuous as possible so no-one will see you or start talking to you. You put on your best grumpy face and deploy curled up, negative body language. You listen to the seminar, ask no questions, then get ready to go – because no-one has spoken to you and they don't look like a friendly bunch. You head off home. On the journey home you say to yourself, "I'm never going there again. Miserable bunch of people, very unapproachable and I didn't make any worthwhile contacts".

If you don't give out any welcoming "come and talk to me" signals, then you will not attract anyone to come and talk to you. Why should anyone bother? There are plenty of other chatty interesting people in the room to choose from. So, what makes us behave like this? Fear. Fear of not being interesting. Fear of not having anything to say. This is ridiculous of course as we are all interesting and all have plenty to say. We just need to find a way through the barriers.

Tip 1: Have no expectations

To network effectively, you need to change your mindset. Networking is not about what *you* can get out of it but what you can *offer* to others. That might seem strange but if you become a powerful resource for other people by sharing your knowledge and skills, you will gain business trust and credibility which is the basis of any networking relationship. I know some particular types of serial networkers who aim to leave a networking event with at least 20 business cards; they rush home, put the details into their contacts database and recalculate the new total number of contacts they have made. There is something to this process as you might come across someone with a very specific skill or business set up but if you call one of these contacts for some advice in two years time, will they remember you? Unlikely. My aim from networking is to build solid relationships for the long-term where I probably offer more than I get at first. But if I now ask, I always get.

Tip 2: Do not sell

People selling. You can see them coming a mile off. Clutching their business cards and visibly working the room, they are coming to get you. Some networking groups are set up for this very purpose and that's absolutely fine providing you know that's the basis of the networking event. In my experience this style of selling opportunity only works for people with very tangible services/products such as accountants, retailers or recruitment specialists. If you are selling a consultancy service, this is completely the wrong set up and the wrong target audience. You must build a relationship first, give plenty before receiving, be a preferred source of knowledge and then find out if someone has a need for your services.

Tip 3: Body language/smiling

As we saw above, if you adopt a negative body language and look surly, people will not flock to you. Be aware of your body language and try to develop an open posture – yes, shoulders back, head up, a more open arm posture, wine glass forwards (should you have one). The act of standing like this actually energises you as your posture and breathing will be much better. Add a smiling face to that, and you are off. I don't mean start beaming at anyone, but when you do catch someone's eye, deliver a welcoming smile.

Tip 4: Develop some chit-chat

So, smile in place, shoulders back, you have spotted someone you think looks interesting to talk to. Disaster! You have nothing to say! Don't immediately lunge in with details about your job or moaning about your dreadful day, start with some chit-chat. It can be as banal as you like. "Hi, what's the wine like?" "Hey, isn't this a fabulous venue?" "This should be (was) a great seminar, have you heard any of the speakers before?" It's just an opening line and a ready-made hook for your networking partner to step into the conversation. Develop some simple questions like this to get your networking going.

Tip 5: Listen to what people are interested in

To be a great networker, your aim is to help people or to connect them to others who can help them. This requires excellent listening skills. Be actively interested in people and see if you find out three things about them during your conversation that is *not* to do with work e.g. you may find out that they live near you, that they went to the same school as you or that they also love cycling. This is quite a challenge because we normally start with "What do you do?" If you start here and find you have no connection, you may walk away. However, that person has a great deal of other knowledge and their own extensive network of contacts that you have not tapped into. Work the conversation around to find out what they are interested in.

Tip 6: Connect people

This takes practice (and a memory!) but try and remember what people have said to you and as you talk to others and see if you can make any connections. You will have undoubtedly experienced the situation at an event where you say "Oh, someone I spoke to earlier knows all about that. Shall I introduce you?" It's quite a proud moment too because a) you have remembered what someone else has said b) you are solving someone else's problem and c) you have just added a notch to your reputation as a useful contact. It is also very satisfying to see people making that connection and finding value in their discussions.

Tip 7: Introduce yourself in different ways

When we introduce ourselves, we say our name and our job title. OK, that's one way. But at your next networking event, try and introduce yourself in a different way each Time you meet someone. This means you have to think of different aspects of yourself that are interesting. So at a specific seminar you might say "Hi, I'm Lesley; I joined this association/group last month and this is the first event I have attended. Or, "Hi, I'm Lesley; I have read the keynote speaker's new book so I am looking forward to hear him speak". Whatever it is, keep practising a variety of introductions and see how this sparks different conversations.

Tip 8: Sum yourself up in 50 words

It's going well. You are chatting away about the seminar, state of the country, local issues and then the killer question "So, what do you do?" How do you answer that? People might think your job is boring or may not understand what you do at all. Practice this. Write down what you do in no more than fifty words. Use lively action-orientated language, keep it simple so even your granny would understand and then practice it. If you do a job that is complex to understand, this is essential. It's easy to say "I am a doctor" or "I am a solicitor" but "I consult in the area of digital marketing" takes a bit more explaining. You will be asked what you "do", so be ready for it and blow them away.

Tip 9: Muscle in on a group

This one is slightly worse than being eaten alive by a tiger. You are on your own and others are chatting away. You can't see anyone else who is on their own to speak to. What do you do? You are going to have to muscle in on a small group. Rather than seeing the group as a fully formed club with entry rules, see them as a collection of people on their own who have drifted together in the past 10 minutes with the purpose of chatting to someone. Stand close to the group (shoulders back, head up, smile in place), have a look in and find someone whose eye you can catch. Do not push in and break up the conversation but be close enough to hear the conversation and when it might naturally end. When this happens, people will look around more and that is the moment to catch the eye of your victim. Best smile forwards and they will connect with you and undoubtedly welcome you in. That person has given you permission to enter the group and you can start with one of your lines of chit-chat or pick up on the topic the group were discussing.

Tip 10: Keep practicing

There will be times when you go to an event to network and it just doesn't work for you. Maybe your mindset is wrong or you just do not connect with the people you meet. That's OK, but don't let that put you off from trying again. You may also have a bad experience when a particular group were unwelcoming or very cliquey, but that should not deter you. You will meet different people next time that will be great. Also, to build relationships with people, you have to meet them several times and the more you go to particular events, the more people you will get to know and the more connections you can make. It's a numbers thing. So, going once and never again will not work. Practice networking wherever you can; bus stops, supermarket queues, on the train. But most essentially, at work. If you network successfully across your organisation to build your reputation and make use of your external contacts, you will become a very powerful ally and a 'go-to' person.