

One step away from a goldmine...

Using networking to generate outstanding business results

So you're *in your prime* and you've started or are thinking of starting your own business. Fantastic! But how are you going to market your business, grow your customer base and make sure people know you exist? There's one simple, highly cost-effective answer that every business owner needs to consider regardless of the type of business they operate and the amount they can afford to spend on marketing. *Networking*.

Unfortunately, networking tends to be the one aspect of marketing – next to giving presentations - which just about everyone fears and dislikes. Perhaps you had to do it in your earlier career and struggled with it, or perhaps it's something you've always managed to steer clear of and have never wanted to do.

Yet compared to other more expensive forms of marketing, networking is your easiest and quickest means of generating new business, so it's vital that you get a grip on it and ensure that it isn't sidelined by other less challenging activities. In order to do so, you need to tackle your hidden fears, make a plan, and understand how to go about it. After that, with a bit of practice, you'll be amazed at how easy it all becomes.

What are you actually afraid of?

The answer for most of us is 'the unknown'. Unless you're one of the minority who are naturally gregarious and adore meeting new people, you probably lack confidence and feel awkward at the idea of 'selling yourself' to strangers.

But you're by no means alone – even those who appear to be supremely confident probably share these feelings, or certainly did at one stage. They've just learned how to hide them.

And of course, our culture doesn't help. No doubt as a child you were taught things like '*Don't speak until you're spoken to*', '*Don't boast or show off*', '*Don't make yourself the centre of attention*'. Is it any wonder we shrink from the idea of introducing ourselves to complete strangers for the sole purpose of telling them how good we are?

Perhaps you're afraid that no one will talk to you, you'll faint with embarrassment, you'll forget your own name...? All of these are quite ridiculous and highly unlikely, so what it comes down to is that all you're actually afraid of is being outside your comfort zone for a short period of time. That's not really a huge challenge is it? .

Understand the purpose of networking

'Networking is a waste of time, you never get anything out of it.' If that's your attitude you probably have unrealistic expectations. The likelihood of immediately winning business at a networking event is about the same as winning the lottery. You need to rethink what networking actually is and only *then* will it start to work.

Networking represents the first step in building potentially profitable relationships. But it is only the first step. The relationship has to be grown and only then will it result in your contact giving you business, or more likely, referring others to you. Through your connection with them, over time, the considerable pool of people your contact knows will become accessible to you - hence the phrase '*one step away from a goldmine*'.

What do you want to achieve?

Successful networking comes down to being absolutely clear about what you want to achieve for your business through networking – for example, increased visibility, a support group of like-minded people who you can turn to for advice, or access to other people's networks and customers.

No doubt you'll be seeking a combination of these, but you need to be precise in your goals. If you just go out with a vague idea of 'growing the business' you won't get anywhere.

Set objectives

In order to focus your networking, you need to be absolutely clear about exactly what type of business you want and the types of company or individuals you want it from. This will help you

decide the messages you want to get across and also the networking events likely to be most beneficial. You also need to set objectives for the number of networking events you will attend and the number of new contacts you will come away with after each event.

Decide where to go

It's rare these days to find any town or city where the options aren't endless. If you belong to a trade professional body, start there and see what events they hold. Otherwise contact your local Business Link www.businesslink.co.uk or Chamber of Commerce or the Federation of Small Business www.fsb.org.uk for advice (the latter is a membership-based organisation but is worth investigating.). One of the outcomes of networking will be finding out where others in your area go to, and how they rate what's on offer.

Prepare your message

Before you set foot outside the door, spend time devising a short response to the ubiquitous question *'What do you do?'* Don't automatically say what you *are*, e.g. an accountant, instead think of some message – ideally slightly intriguing or humorous - that will lead others to question you further. For example, *'I'm a spaceman.'* - the response of an estate agent who specialised in office space!

Arrive early

Arriving promptly allows you to meet or renew contact with the event organisers – your first potentially profitable port of call. Ask them who else is coming, explain the sort of people you're interested in meeting and ask them to introduce you. You'll also be well-placed for meeting people as they arrive, so the next steps will be easy.

Make the first move

Overcome your fear of rejection and don't stand waiting to be approached. Find someone who looks interesting and go over and introduce yourself. If the person was standing alone, you've already done them a favour - nobody likes being a wallflower. Remember the powerful signals sent out by body language and tone of voice – these count for far more in terms of first impressions than what you actually say. So look friendly and *smile* – it'll immediately make the other person feel that you genuinely want to get to know them.

Give, don't take

The biggest mistake most people make when networking is trying to sell their services instead of trying to establish the other person's needs. Your focus should be on finding some way that you can help *them* – perhaps by putting them in contact with a third party. By doing so you'll start to grow

a bond between you, putting them in a position where they'll want to help you.

Ask and listen

Finding out someone's needs means asking them open questions (ones which can't be answered with yes/no response). *'What do you find is currently the biggest challenge in your business?'* is the sort of question likely to start an interesting conversation, whereas *'Is business okay?'* may kill it stone dead. Having asked, *actively listen* to what the person is saying, picking up on clues about what is really important to them.

Circulate

The purpose of a networking event is to network, so don't feel guilty about moving on. Even if you think you've found a potential 'goldmine', arrange to follow them up after the event. Extricate yourself politely, make sure you've exchanged business cards and obtain the other person's permission to contact them/ keep in touch (though you won't want to do so with everyone you meet).

Follow up

Networking counts for nothing if you don't follow up. If you said you would call your contact or send them some information, make sure you do - *promptly*. If nothing else, write to them saying you enjoyed meeting and promising to contact them again (then make a diary note and DO IT!).

Keep in touch

Having made a potentially profitable contact, don't let them slip away. Send them something every few months – a copy of an article that might interest them, your company's newsletter, an invitation to an event. This reminds them that you still want to be part of their circle. The result? Sometime in the future, whenever they or one of their contacts needs your type of service, they'll be the ones contacting *you*...

Measure your success

Finally, review your progress every month. Where did you go? How successful was each event? Who did you meet? Who did you follow up with afterwards, or who contacted you? Have you done any business for or through people you've met through networking? How are you feeling about it now?

Over time, following this process will ensure that what you've always regarded as a loathsome and boring burden will soon become second nature and something you actively relish. Suddenly you're enjoying being part of a network of friends and contacts - and your business is benefiting too!