

How to network your way to success

It's a well-known fact that referrals and word-of-mouth marketing is the most effective form of finding new customers – and networking means actively adding to your contacts. As they say, it's all about who you know, not what you know.

Here are some pointers to help you get the most out of your networking: it's not just a case of attending meetings, but the approach you take.

1. Search out the opportunities



There are networking opportunities all around us, from formalised meetings to wine and dinner events. Even your private social life may present opportunities. So make sure you always carry business cards with you.

In terms of organised networking events, BNI, Her Business Networks and Auckland Executive Club are just a few. Identify where your target market is most likely to be, and go to those meetings.

If you don't enjoy a particular group, don't write it off just yet: there may be other groups in your region which have a different approach and different mix of people. This is particularly true in the case of BNI, where each chapter has a very different personality. So be sure to persist until you find something that suits you – and then commit to going regularly. Remember, it's about building trust and nurturing relationships – and that takes time.

2. Quality not quantity

When you attend a networking event, the aim is NOT to leave with as many business cards as you can stuff in your pockets, but to obtain a number of quality contacts that you've spoken to.

When you get to the networking event, keep an eye and ear open as to what businesses the other attendees operate in. Then circulate the room to make sure you get to talk to the most relevant people.

It's generally considered good etiquette to give your card only when it's asked for (unless you have a good reason to give them your card, for example if the other person has run out of business cards). So do make sure you ask for the other person's business card: and it can be a good memory jogger to write on the card afterwards when and where you met the person, and any specific things you talked about. That'll help you accelerate the relationship building process.



Networking as a marketing tool is about "farming, not hunting": don't ever be tempted to make a hard sell at a networking event, or you'll see the dust clouds as people run from you as fast as they can. They'll do business with you when they're good and ready to: your job is to sow the seeds and grow the trust.

3. Follow up promptly

Great, you've been to a networking event, met some interesting people, and have expanded your business card file. What's next?

At the very next opportunity – and that means no later than the next working day – follow up with a friendly email. Something along the lines of “it was great to meet you and I'd be really interested to...” is just the thing. If you think you and your new contact have some synergies, suggest meeting for a coffee to get to know them better. This is essential for developing a business relationship, so be sure you:

- Meet your contact on time;
- Give and receive marketing material; and
- Keep in touch with them afterwards.



This can also be a good time to invite them to sign up to your newsletter, as it's just as important to keep your network contacts in the loop as your customers. That way your new buddy can get to know your business over time – but please, please don't spam them! Offer to subscribe to their newsletter in return.

4. Be a connector



Expanding your network isn't just about you in the here and now: there are other purposes too.

Firstly, you may meet some strategic alliance partners: these are companies who have a similar target market to you, but where you don't compete directly. For example, builders, electricians and plumbers can often work in harmony, marketing to each other's databases. Finding strategic alliance partners who are on the same page as you, trustworthy and proactive doesn't happen overnight, but it's a very worthwhile pursuit.

Secondly, you may meet people who would be valuable contacts for other people in your network. By connecting people, you become a leader and influencer in your network, which elevates your position and respect.

What's more, the philosophy of “givers gain” means that if you unselfishly pass business on to other people (without there being anything in it for you), you will be repaid in the long run. Call it karma, or the law of reciprocity, or whatever you like... but it works!

5. Remember the details

Remembering small details about the people in your network makes a big difference to the relationship: it creates rapport and friendship. This can be simple things such as their spouse's/child's/dog's name; their favourite sport or hobby; their birthday; that sort of thing.

If you're panicking about having a terrible memory – that's what databases are for! Type in the details and then read them or print them out before you go to see that prospect – and keep adding to your database.

At birthday time, send them a card or email: again, electronic reminders with annual recurrences set are invaluable. So few people and so few businesses bother with such things, that your efforts will be noticed and appreciated.

Generally speaking, we have to like someone before we trust them, so this will add some major brownie points in your likability rating, thereby boosting your trustworthiness.

6. Be brave!

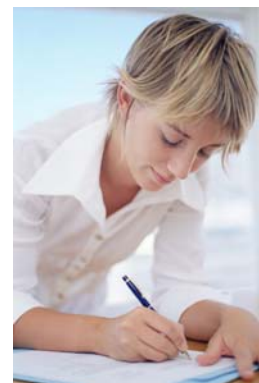
We often hear the excuse that people are too shy to attend a networking meeting; they don't like speaking in public; and so on.

Just remember that people attend these events to meet other people! This isn't a high school popularity contest; this is the business world. And if you do end up talking to someone you don't like, then make your excuses (a fresh cup of tea; loo break; etc.) and find someone else who's more on your wavelength!

7. Don't reinvent the wheel – use scripts

It's quite common to think "what am I going to say?" both in the networking meetings themselves, or in the follow-ups. That's where scripts are invaluable: why put yourself through the pain of reinventing the wheel every time, when you don't have to!

Besides, few of us are born with the gift of the gab: and it's far better to use a script and convey what you want in a meaningful way, than be kicking yourself on the way home for not saying what you really wanted to say. Here are some basic script-types you could write:



- **Elevator pitch:** a 20 second intro that summarises what your business does in a nutshell. (This is harder than it sounds, so write a few and ask your friends and colleagues for some honest feedback. Or get FX Marketing to write a suitably customer-oriented, benefit-laden, jargon-free intro.)
- **Target market:** be clear on who your target market is and be prepared to describe them clearly and concisely. After all, if you're not clear on who you're aiming at, then neither will those around you.
- **Follow-up email:** write a standard follow-up email that you can copy and paste. Just add in a few personal touches and that job's done.

8. Tools of the trade



This might sound very obvious, but make sure you have business cards!

Business cards are one of THE most important marketing tools, as that's often the very first marketing piece your prospects and strategic alliance partners will see.

Don't skimp on quality, and hand out your business cards freely. After all, they're of much more use in your network contacts' hands than in your stationery cupboard.

Business cards have two sides, so why not use both sides? Put all your contact details on one side: most business cards are stored in card files and pulling out the cards to look up contact details is quite irritating. So what goes on the reverse? That's up to you. It could be:

- A summary of your product or service.
- Your customer guarantee.
- A special offer or other call to action.
- Some useful information that adds value to what you do.

Whatever you choose, the aim of a business card is for the recipient to remember you – and your business – even once they've filed your card away. So make it unique, and make it memorable.

Carry your business cards with you at all times, preferably in a small case so that they don't become dog-eared or crumpled.

9. Treasure your referrals

Great, so you've been networking hard and have been given a referral. Congratulations! Here are some pointers on what to do next, as this is important in how you're perceived:

- **Contact the person you've been referred to immediately:** certainly within the next business day or two. Referrals go cold over time, so it's best to strike while the iron's hot.
- **Keep the referee in the loop as to how you're getting on with the referral:** remember, the referee has trusted you to look after their contact. Keeping the referee informed demonstrates not just your appreciation for the referral, but also your professionalism. It also educates the referee as to what's a good referral for you.

Sometimes you may receive a referral that isn't suitable: either you don't offer the product or service that's desired, or the client isn't in your target market.

If that's the case, then you need to take ownership of this, as you haven't been communicating clearly enough as to what your business does, and for whom. So re-examine how you communicate, what you're communicating, and make it more specific.

10. Not all referrals are created equal

The ideal referral will be a situation where the referee has recommended you to their colleague, told them what you do, and left the conversation so that their colleague is waiting for your call. This is the best situation, as you're then in control of the conversation, and more likely to get a positive outcome.

On the flip side, a less desirable referral is when someone tells you "I've given so-and-so your business card, so they might call you". While it's great that your business cards are circulating, in this situation you are powerless to contact the prospect. You could try asking the referee for their colleague's details so you can give them a call.

11. Thank yous

If your new contacts give you some business, or refer a good contact to you, thank them for it. In this era of electronic communication, a handwritten note or thank you card goes a very long way indeed.

Showing your appreciation will be appreciated in return, and encourage that person to give you even more referrals! Just be sure to be consistent with your thank you cards: if you only send them out sometimes, or for some events and not others – it WILL get noticed. So it makes sense to set up a simple system to ensure this is done regularly and consistently.

12. It's all about attitude

The attitude you bring along to your networking events will get noticed and will reflect in the way people respond to you. People who do the hard-sell; act desperate; are overly assertive or aggressive; or are disinterested and vague will all struggle.

The best attitude to bring along is a happy, positive one: smile, be friendly, and take an interest in those around you. Put your nerves to one side – enjoy – and go with the flow.

And if you can't get referrals for everyone in your group from the outset, don't worry – it'll come. Just be sure to have your network contacts in mind the whole time, and you'll soon start being able to give referrals. Remember – it's about an attitude of willingness, giving, and trust.



Good luck! **FX**

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