

Networking: Your Best Self-Marketing Tool

By Renee Lewis

When it comes to making professional contacts, the term networking is being thrown out all over the place these days, and it's easy to confuse virtual interactions with the real deal. Just so we're clear: "Friending" on Facebook or inviting others to join your LinkedIn page have their place but they are no substitute for professional networking by attending events and following up with those you meet. Effective networking simply involves establishing a meaningful connection.

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It helps to start in an environment where you have something in common with others, for example, professional associations or philanthropic organizations. Try a local alma mater group where you might run into someone you know. Great connections often come from a referral from a friend, so don't hesitate to ask others what they would recommend.

Networking should be an integral part of your professional life. But there are ways to do it well and get the most out of your networking experiences. Here are my top tips for making the most of networking:

#1 Know why you're there. You're there to meet people. So meet people! Reach out and introduce yourself, but take the time to get to know each person you meet. It's not about the number of cards you walk away with, rather the number of people you meet who would want to invite you to a follow up call or lunch. Consider setting goals that focus on the most productive outcomes such as being invited to lunches or encouraged to follow-up next week. Another goal could be

getting to know something substantial and personal about X number of people at an event.

#2 Make friends first. The biggest mistake you can make at an event is seeing everyone in the room as a prospect then wasting their time and yours with non-productive follow-up lunches or calls. People know when they are a target, and they will resist you. First seek to know the person – make a friend so they want to do business with and help *you*. As you know, creating strong relationships takes an investment of your time and theirs.

#3 Be selfless. This is an attitude, and an important one to adopt. Go into every networking situation with the mindset of "How can I help you?" instead of "How you can help me." This attitude is particularly important on a follow-up call or lunch. Appreciate the fact that someone is giving their valuable time to you. Assume they see the time they give to you as an investment – so make theirs a wise one by giving them something they need. Of course, thank your contacts for their time before and after a meeting. But, more importantly, find a way you can help them. This gives you a natural and *welcomed* way to follow up yet again while continuing to strengthen the relationship. Be overt about helping if you have to. What's wrong with asking "Is there anything I can help *you* with?" Giving first is a clear way of creating the most meaningful connections.

#4 Look everyone in the eye whenever you can. When you go into a networking event assuming everyone's a prospect your eyes give you away because they focus on reading every name tag that floats by. If you make a connection with someone, then focus on having a conversation with them. And if you really want to remember their name, introduce them to 1 or 2 people you know.

#5 Meet in person. Remember, when you're seeking information or help from someone in your network, you're more likely to make a stronger impression and get more out of the connection if you meet with them face-to-face rather than communicating by phone or email – it's your time to shine, take advantage of it by presenting yourself with poise and confidence, and reinforce your position with positive body language. Whether you're looking for a job lead, feedback, a reference or information about generating new business, you are more likely to

get what you need if you're face-to-face. The reason is simple: It's harder to say no to someone when you're looking him or her in the eye. Networking should be integrated as a part of your job description. Whether you put it on your weekly to-do list or approach it informally, it's important to regularly and consistently work to grow and strengthen your network. Make building relationships your highest priority – this approach will lead to more established contacts and friendships that can have a positive impact on every aspect of your professional life.



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