

HOW TO CONQUER THE NETWORKING NIGHTMARE

Establishing a strong network of mutually beneficial contacts is important for business growth, but if networking doesn't come naturally then these six steps will help.



Not everyone in business is a natural show pony. Some are inherently shy, and while you don't need to be the loudest person at networking events, you still need to know how to work the room. After all, 'it's not what you know, but who you know' – to a degree at least! Here are six steps to getting over the fear of networking:

STEP 1. FIND A FUNCTION

To ease yourself into the networking scene, accompany a friend or associate who already attends industry networking functions. They'll be happy to take a guest, and once at the meeting they will no doubt introduce you to their friends and other industry acquaintances. If you don't know anyone in an industry group, more bravery is required. Check out the Network site, Fitness Australia, Active Management and other industry go-to destinations to check out any upcoming networking opportunities. Get yourself there and introduce yourself to the guys running the show – odds are they will warmly welcome a new face and introduce you to regular attendees.

STEP 2. MEET SOMEONE

Not always easy. What if no one in the room approaches you to introduce themselves? A certain amount of bravery is required here. Time is money and the aim is to get a return on your time by attending this function. Approach a small group that are conversing. They will usually invite you to join in. If not, move along to another group. This method has a high success rate because the others are also trying to network and they know that their next great contact could be you.

STEP 3. INTRODUCE YOURSELF

This may not be as easy as it sounds. Remember, every call is a sales call. Have your introduction practiced. Believe it or not, some folks actually fumble their own name. Say your name clearly and maybe just a little slower and clearer than usual. Exaggerate the syllables. Few come to a networking function to learn a tongue twister. Cut to the chase and say 'my friends call me Sid'.

STEP 4. PRESENT WHAT YOU SELL

Use your 'elevator pitch' – that is, a short summary of what you and your business do, including the value proposition (i.e. what you do to solve your customers' problem or add value to their life).

Don't be put off by the prospect of delivering this pitch because it sounds a bit rehearsed – it needs to be word perfect! You only have thirty seconds, so something along the lines of: 'I am in the (broad description) business, specialising in (narrow description) located somewhere close.'

Watch their face closely. What is the reaction? Mostly your new acquaintance will courteously ask further questions. This is the dangerous moment. You can now be trapped talking about yourself in unnecessarily great detail out of sheer politeness. Networking is mixing with people who can become useful contacts, so try to avoid wasting time and politely move on to the next person.

STEP 5. QUALIFY YOUR LEAD

Having successfully introduced yourself and delivered your elevator pitch, it's time to qualify your prospect. Remember to stay focused. Every call is a sales call. As you finish your elevator pitch and listen to their response, if they don't say 'I need to work with you' move to the next step. Don't linger or they will waffle. Break the pause with 'Tell me what do you do...Bill?' Don't worry if you can't remember their name, use it to your advantage. If they have a name tag on, read the first name slowly – everyone loves to hear their name one more time! You sales lead will now hopefully deliver their elevator pitch. Listen carefully for clues of usefulness. No one is use/less, but remember that you are here for business.

STEP 6. CLOSE THE SALE

'That's very interesting Bill, can I give you my card?' Usually your new contact will respond in kind. Check out the card. If you thought Bill was a great lead, his card should be confirmation. If not, thank him kindly and excuse yourself. Moving on is vital, even if it looks a bit crass. Standard excuses are acceptable when networking. Polite excuses include 'Excuse me, I must touch base with someone over there' or if no one is around, 'do you know where the toilets are?' Guaranteed to set you free!

Follow the steps above and watch how the other really successful networkers go. You might be surprised that with a bit of practice you too will be making a wider range of contacts for your business and maybe even meet some new friends.

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