
Discover The Tools You Need To Get To The Top

by JOE TAKASH

Be honest. The last networking event you attended was probably about as exciting as watching paint peel. Striking up a conversation with a stranger is never easy, and as a result, you probably heard plenty of ho-hum conversations that went nowhere. The problem is that many people often approach networking as a forced activity, during which we repress our natural personality and energy, which decreases our personal effectiveness. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Networking plays an extremely important role in our lives. It has proven to be an effective way to find jobs, get promotions, gain customers and make more money in business. We have actually been networking our whole lives. If you think about it, you will realize that discovering new restaurants, a good school system for your kids and the right neighborhood in which to raise your family, are all usually the result of networking. The only difference is that business networking is arranged as a formal event, while personal networking usually occurs naturally as part of our day-to-day interactions with others.

What many people don't realize is that business networking is a skill. As such, anyone can develop the ability to network, regardless of his or her natural disposition. Once we think of networking as a skill, we realize that we can learn to network well. All it takes is practice and a bit of planning.

Tools Needed to Become a Master at Networking

If you want to be successful in business, then you need to develop your ability to network. Below are simple tools anyone can use in order to develop the necessary skills and become a more effective networker.

- Make a great first impression.

Every time you meet someone new, think, "SHE is the key." S.H.E. stands for Smile/Handshake/Eye Contact. By greeting people with a genuine smile, a firm and friendly handshake and direct eye contact, you set a positive tone and make the best first impression possible. And first impressions are what people remember.

- Be a name-learning machine.

Knowing someone's name demonstrates that you value the person and that you have differentiated him or her from the crowd. It says, "I remember you; you made a good impression on me." There is no better way to make others feel good about themselves and also to have a positive impression of you. One way to remember names more easily is to repeat the name after you are introduced, followed by, "It's nice to meet you," or a similar appropriate statement. In your mind, associate the name with someone else you know with that name, with a physical feature of the person you are meeting or anything that will jog your memory at a later time.

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- Ask open-ended questions.

The following are questions that will get people to open up, tell you about themselves and, professionally speaking, fall in love with you:

- Tell me about your job.
- What are your most important responsibilities?
- What do you like most about what you do?
- Where are you from originally?
- Do you have children?
- What are you passionate about?
- What do you like to do in your free time?

Asking people questions about themselves and showing a genuine interest in their answers is the best way to show appreciation, and it's a potent networking tool. Offer information about yourself as well, so that others who may not know how to be effective networkers can still learn about you and become potential clients or references.

- Master the art of listening.

Great leaders have mastered the art of being great listeners. But for most of us, the daily distractions of cell phones, deadlines and a multitude of obligations often prevent us from being fully engaged listeners. A simple question to ask yourself with anyone you network with is, "Am I fully engaged when listening?" Fully engaged means being entirely consumed in the other person and what he or she is saying. So eliminate distractions such as cell phones, and close your office door. Show attentive body language by facing the other person and looking him or her in the eyes. Practice silence so you don't violate the "don'ts" of listening, which include rehearsing what you want to say next, finishing people's sentences and interrupting.

- Establish common ground.

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When you find common ground with someone, you raise the level of the networking relationship from average to great, because now you've planted the most important seed for all relationships — a common shared interest. From this foundation, you can build a relationship of respect or even friendship. This can increase your business, because people like to do business with people they like. To find common ground, apply the "ask and listen" technique. Use open-ended questions, like those mentioned earlier, to bring you closer to standing on common ground with anyone you meet.

- Learn to help others before yourself.

Many people fail at networking because it's obvious they are only out to help themselves. This is an absolute turn-off in a networking situation (and most other situations). The most successful networkers take the opposite approach. They think of the many different ways they can help other people before helping themselves. For example, if you meet a freelance photographer who is starting her own business, you might be able to refer her to a graphic artist you do business with so that she can get her business cards done. This is how the web of networking creates success for all involved. To put yourself in this mindset, think of yourself as the networking coordinator. In this role, you will make sure that everyone benefits from each other as much as possible whenever you meet and talk with others. When you are always on the lookout for ways to help other people, they will trust you and by extension, your business.

- Describe how what you do helps others.

When you tell others about your job, think of them first and explain how what you do helps others. If you're an insurance salesperson, tell anyone who asks that you help others find the lowest rates possible, or that you provide the highest level of coverage for those in high-risk categories. Regardless of your profession, people want to know how what you do ben-



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efits others. It gives them something of interest to tell others about you.

- Follow up and work your network.

After a networking event, establish a system to record the data of the contacts you've acquired and use it to refresh your memory about the details you gathered. Many skilled networkers recommend that you use a PDA to write down specific information about people, as these devices are terrific for tracking contacts. Also, you can mark your calendar to remind you to touch base with people in your network. This follow-up activity will keep you in the front of people's minds when it comes time to do business.

Network for Success

Once you put these tools into practice, you'll find that networking can be a lot of fun and you'll actually start to look forward to it. Good networking skills will give you the opportunity to meet new friends and associates, while growing your business at the same time. And you can do it anytime, anywhere. As long as you have the desire to increase your business and an organized system to help you, the benefits of good networking to your personal growth and professional success will be unlimited. □

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