

12 steps to make networking events successful

By Mike Klassen

My first networking event was a failure. I wasn't prepared and I had unrealistic expectations. These days, I see people making the same mistakes – and more. Even if you're a networking veteran, you'll find these ideas worth considering.

1. Choose events wisely

Whether or not it's a good event is hard to know until you go at least once. Your local Chamber probably holds a regular event, but there are many other events that require a little digging.

Check your local newspaper or ask around and see what you uncover. Obviously, look for events that match with the product or service you offer. You may even find a website listing regional networking events.

Don't go back to events where most attendees have what I call a *seller's mentality*. These people couldn't care less about what you do. They *only* care about making sales. Making sales is important, but taking the time to build mutually beneficial relationships is better.

2. Call ahead

Here's what I hear the most from newcomers at an event: "I didn't know what to expect." There's no excuse for that. You should know the format of the event, how many people typically show up, and whether you can bring your marketing material to either hand out or place on a table. A two-minute phone call to the event organizer will get you the answers you need.

3. Prepare your promo

Some events have attendees sitting around a table taking turns to give a 60-second promo for their business. Other events let you mingle the whole time. Either way, be able to clearly and quickly outline what you do and the benefits.

A mistake I see often is people who either can't come up with 60-seconds or who can't stop talking after 60-seconds. The former is due to bad planning. So is the latter, but it's also disrespectful to others in the group. Don't be remembered for the wrong reasons.

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4. Dress for success

I'm going to assume you know how to dress professionally. And since you called ahead, you know if the event is casual or formal.

But don't forget to wear any of your association pins or emblems. Something like a Rotary pin can help you connect with someone who is either a fellow Rotarian or interested in hearing about Rotary. That helps you develop a stronger bond. Give someone a reason to connect with you at a deeper level.

At this point, you haven't even arrived at the event, yet these four steps will put you far ahead of a lot of other new people who show up.

5. Have your cards ready

It's always interesting to me how, at a networking event, some people have to fish around for a business card like they're shocked someone asked for one. Part of networking is exchanging cards, so be ready. And, please, make sure the cards you hand out are clean.

True story... A businessman was handing me his card, but we both noticed that the card had something on it. I thought it might be food. As he scratched the unknown substance off and handed the card to me he said, and I am not making this up, "Must be a booger." Uh... OK.

One other thing... look at the back of any card given to you. If nothing is there, fine. But the best networkers don't waste the backside of a card. Sometimes that backside information does a great job of summarizing what the business is all about. If it is blank, jot down some notes from your conversation so you can recall important things you learned about that person and their business. (*See step 8*)

6. Arrive early

You may feel silly being the first one at the event other than the organizers, but I've found it's the best way to get quality time with one or two people without distractions. Even talking with the organizers can be valuable since they know their event best.

When the next attendee comes in, don't be shy. Welcome them just as you would if you were the host. Don't worry about telling that person about yourself... that will come out in good time. Focus on them, memorize their name and find out how you can help that person. When the next person comes in, be the one to start the introductions.

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7. Show interest

Don't be what I call a *drive-by networker*. You know the type. They want to hand you their card, exchange some quick pleasantries, and then hit the next person.

While getting business cards into as many hands as possible is a good goal, this drive-by technique typically paints the person as someone who is only interested in himself or herself. Take the time to get to know the person receiving your card.

8. Take notes

I rarely see anyone do this. Imagine what it would feel like if someone thought what you were saying was so important that they took notes.

Wouldn't that feel fantastic? Wouldn't you tend to remember that person? And wouldn't it be even better if that person took the time to ask you how they might be on the lookout for a good client for you? Of course! Now... be that person!

9. Stay late

This goes along with step 6. Don't be in a rush to leave. Post-event can be a prime time to solidify any connections you made.

Show some interest and ask your new acquaintances if they made any good contacts. See what they thought of the event and use that to help you with step 12.

If it seems like you made a good connection with someone, try to schedule an appointment so the two of you can talk more. The networking doesn't have to end just because the event is over.

10. Have realistic expectations

Remember when I mentioned having unrealistic expectations after my first networking event? I went back to my studio thinking that everyone I talked to would be calling me to become a client.

It didn't happen and I shouldn't have been surprised. But I was a networking beginner, so what did I know?

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However, that's what I see most often these days... people attending an event for the first time, not getting any business, then giving up and never going back.

If the event really doesn't fit with your mission, it's OK not to go back. But keep this in mind: People like to do business with people they know. They can't get to know you if you only show up once or twice.

11. Follow-up

One year, I attended ten of my Chamber's twelve monthly networking events and talked to about 25 people each time. Can you guess how many times someone I talked to at those events followed-up with me to make a pitch? Twice.

If you have names and numbers from a networking event, it won't surprise those people if you contact them. Yes, they might turn you down, but you never know until you call.

12. Re-evaluate

I continually see people attend events that do nothing for them. There's often a fear that if you stop attending, you might miss out on some business.

Don't make that mistake. If the attendees or represented businesses aren't a good match for your business, cut your losses and allocate that time to better events or other types of marketing.

So that's it... 12 steps to make networking events successful. There are more than these 12 steps, but these steps are a great start.

Even putting a few of these ideas to work will be a benefit to you. Putting all 12 in action will be even better.

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