

# Business Matters Newsletter

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## Tips for Business Networking



I attend several business networking events each week. I am not a natural, but I have learned how to approach people that I do not know, and to build relationships.

Networking functions just like those childhood “Join-a-Dot” pictures. One person leads to another and another and, eventually, a new client or customer is revealed.

But with all the networking groups that exist, which ones are best for you? And how can you get the most out of each of them? The following seven networking tips will help you not only improve business but also make interesting new friends and acquaintances.

### **1. Explore your opportunities.**

Joining a variety of networking groups gives you access to the widest range of people. Have an idea of the kind of people you wish to meet. There are generally four types of groups: business networking groups, such as 4 Networking; geographic groups, such as your local Chamber of

Commerce; service groups, such as Rotary; and industry-specific associations. Different times suit different people. Attend a group at least three times before deciding whether it's for you. Groups don't have to carry the "networking" label to be good opportunities. What about community groups connected with schools, sports, theatres?

Where do people in your business's target market gather?

**2. Farm, don't hunt.** Many approach an event with the hope or expectation that they'll make a new client from that event. You'll find more success, however, if you view networking as a long-term process. Get clear on why you're networking. "It's more about farming than it is about hunting," says Dr. Ivan Misner, co-author of *Masters of Networking* and Founder of BNI, a well-known international business networking group. "It's about cultivating relationships with other people."

**3. Don't forget your networking "accessories."** Of course, always come to an event with business cards and a name tag (look online if needs be). On the latter, you might include not only your name but what you do as well. This gives others an easy starting point for conversation. In addition, make a habit of writing notes on the back of each business card so you can personalize your follow up calls and emails.

**4. Get curious.** First, be genuinely interested in the people you meet. Obviously you want to know about their business, but ask questions that aren't limited to someone's profession. For instance: What is one way you have fun at work? What is something that makes you special or unique in your industry? Such questions open up conversation and encourage connection on a more personal level.

**5. Have your "elevator speech" off pat.** Have a clear, concise and specific explanation of what you do and how it helps others. What problem (what "pain") do you solve for your target audience? Be able to clearly articulate this without people's eyes glazing over.

**6. Offer referrals whenever possible.** Often, those who gain the most at networking events are those who give the most. Focus more on what you can give to others than on what you'll get from them. "When I walk into a room, I'm always looking at how I can benefit someone else's life," says Melanie Benson Strick, Director of Shared Vision Network-Los Angeles, a professional and development networking group for entrepreneurs. Make introductions "in the room", if you can, of people who might benefit from talking to each other.

**7. Be scrupulous with your follow up.** Meeting people is just the beginning. It's the follow up that turns connections into relationships. However, the first contact is not the place for a sales pitch. Instead, follow up within 48 hours with material that will help the person, such as a free audio download or a clipped magazine article. Alternatively, invite somebody you want to know better for a coffee, and don't forget social networks like LinkedIn. "You don't build trust when the first thing you do is ask someone to buy your product and service," Misner says. The key, really, is to court, but with sincerity and a genuine desire to help others.

We have a list of networking groups in Birmingham and the Black Country on our website.

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