

## Maximising the power of networking

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### Description



**Networking** is a vital activity for entrepreneurs, job hunters, freelancers, consultants and managers alike. Effective networking can help you find mutual support in your current role, locate new research, ideas and innovations, even benchmarks, best practices and deployment experiences. We gain almost all of our business through networking and you could do too.

There are many ways to network, while some people prefer face to face networking many of us find we can network from our office or home office, using instant messaging, email and new online networking group facilities too. As an example Rick Wolfe, CEO of [www.PostStone.com](http://www.PostStone.com) based in Toronto, facilitates 'breakfast table' innovation discussions between executives of B2B related companies across Asia, Europe and North America. These have resulted in new buyer contacts and eventually new business for the companies involved.

A significant number of small businesses, ours included, deal primarily with very large businesses as clients. Effective networking crosses the boundaries between large and small companies, linking people with shared business challenges and parts of the solution required.

**Online chat** is perhaps the most prevalent form of networking, you may already use MSN Messenger [www.msn.co.uk](http://www.msn.co.uk), Skype or another tool. These tools allow you to hold you a list of the people you interact with most frequently, you can see whether they are immediately available, bounce ideas off them via chat, include others in the conversation and move from chat to a free online conference call. If you're stuck with a tough business problem and need to talk to someone outside your own company about it right now, these tools could provide immediate access to your wider set of contacts and the expertise and answer you need.

Although your contacts can be anywhere in the world, time zones seem to disappear and expensive phone calls do too. If you don't do this already, try installing **Skype** free from [www.Skype.com](http://www.Skype.com) on your home or office PC (if allowed), encourage your key contacts to join too. Don't limit yourself to those in your own company, think about the contacts you respect in the suppliers and buyers you work with, add people that you meet at conferences or on marketing courses, even your family and friends.

During a recent marketing improvement project we needed urgent input on learning cycles and the resulting productivity impacts, within half a day we had all we needed from an Human Resource specialist that happened to be a family member. Who else will go the extra mile to help you out when you need it? But use chat constructively and considerately, ask if your contact is free to chat, talk or help now, they might be trying to concentrate on an important deadline!

The best examples of professional online networking facilities are [www.Linkedin.com](http://www.Linkedin.com) and [www.ecademy.com](http://www.ecademy.com). It's easy and free to register, then to find others to connect to. Some people you will already know and be in touch with, you might also find friends or colleagues you have lost contact with in the past. Once you have a few initial contacts, you can start to explore whether the contacts of your immediate contacts might want to be in touch as well – it's quite likely that they'll have similar interests. They might be the recruiters or consultants that will help you fill vacancies, find interim project roles or even help you to find your next job.

Also, don't forget **everyday networking** which is telling friends, neighbours and suppliers what you do and use other websites such as [www.friendsreunited.co.uk](http://www.friendsreunited.co.uk). There are many specialist

networking groups, e.g. for city workers, business women, industry sector forums etc. To find suitable ones that you might join, conduct a web search depending on your target audiences, networking preferences and availability at different times of day.

Think about how to represent yourself and the type of business your company excels at. People will remember you and your company when they have the business need and the timing is right, or they can recommend you to others. Don't pretend that your company is capable of much more than it really is, your company will become confused with others that have unspecific offerings or your prospective buyers will feel disappointed when they ask for more.

**Alumni networks** are also developing fast, allowing you to keep in touch with past colleagues in their new roles. IBM, for example, supports an alumni network for its US Global Services operation, also the 'Greater IBM' worldwide alumni network using [www.Xing.com](http://www.Xing.com) groups. Virtual meetings can take place almost anywhere, in September 2006 Greater IBM hosted its first virtual alumni meeting on 'Almaden Island' in the [www.secondife.com](http://www.secondife.com) virtual commercial world. Many ex colleagues may now be influential buyers in other companies, just the people you need to stay in touch with – and who need continued access to reliable expertise themselves.

There are many **local networking groups** operating in cities throughout the UK, often meeting for brief early breakfasts and '1 minute getting to know you' experiences. These groups often aim for a mix of professions and company types to encourage both buying and selling within the community. Through this route you can tap into your local economy and easily make others aware of your services, providing and benefiting from recommendations.

**BNI**, for example, ([www.bni.com](http://www.bni.com), [www.bni-europe.co.uk](http://www.bni-europe.co.uk)) is a world-wide educational organisation which will give you a lot more than contacts; it will equip you with skills, practice and confidence to network. In one London BNI group a provider of marketing design services has helped a business coach and an IT service provider to improve their branding and to gain recommendations into their client bases too. A major UK bank has won many new customers through providing a business advisory service into the same networking group.

**Professional bodies** for e.g. marketers also encourage knowledge sharing, whether through topic related events, local meetings or specialist interest groups. Find out more from websites including [www.CIM.co.uk](http://www.CIM.co.uk) [www.theIDM.com](http://www.theIDM.com) [www.Marketingsociety.org.uk](http://www.Marketingsociety.org.uk) or [www.marketors.org](http://www.marketors.org). While none of us want to be actively 'sold to', we are all interested to discuss our challenges and to hear about experiences and solutions from others.

## How to network at events - 10 easy tips

Networking at events can be stressful for some people, worrying about what to say, how to come across, not being too pushy etc.

Here are 10 simple and easy to apply networking tips to help you to make networking at events easier and more productive.

- 1. You have 2 ears and 1 mouth;** use them in that proportion. People like being asked questions and listened to and this will enable you to find out more about them and their companies, so when you respond, it is from an informed position.
- 2. Think of networking as serving others** and exploring what their needs are and how you can help them. Don't just pay lip service to the philosophy, 'givers gain', live it and demonstrate it daily. Find out the issues and needs of your target audience and become an expert. People will respect your point of view and come back for more.
- 3. Set goals for any networking opportunity.** Imagine the event is over. What have you done or achieved? Who have you spoken with and what is the next step. Are you information gathering or sourcing relevant business cards to follow up? Make sure you do what you say you will.
- 4. Write on the back of business cards** the date and place where you met them and their key needs and follow up ASAP. Store business cards by profession and track your follow up. Add all contacts into your address book and even replicate this to e.g. your Blackberry.

**5. Wear something with pockets.** At networking events, keep a supply of your business cards in one pocket to give out and put received business cards in the other pocket. Be ready to recommend other companies and experts, not only your own company.

**6. Never eat and drink at the same time.** It will give your hands too much to do, make you feel uncomfortable and will make it difficult to shake hands with new people. Don't miss out on the fun, but don't drink too much either.

**7. Don't worry about what you should say;** focus on what to ask others. People love to talk about themselves and be asked their opinion or advice, then you can reply in a focused way based on what they've shared with you.

**8. For major networking events, do some research** and prepare key points or questions to ask your target contacts. Take a look at their web site, annual report or recent press coverage. Perhaps try a 'mystery shopping' exercise or talk to friends or contacts who are already customers. Forewarned is forearmed, 'immerse' yourself to feel knowledgeable.

**9. Networking is an 'important but non-urgent' activity.** Plan it in your diary regularly to ensure it happens. Set aside specific times of day, days of the week or month to catch up with your old contacts and follow up new ones. Look forward to the variety of staying in touch with your network, it is not a chore and will pay back in many unexpected ways.

**10. Who are your key contacts** who could provide you with good word-of-mouth referrals? Nurture them and ask them to refer you, don't just assume that they will. Neglect them at your peril, but if you do lose contact don't be afraid to re-contact them later.

Remember that the main thing is to be yourself and have a purpose to your personal and business networking, otherwise you can waste a lot of time and achieve little. Whether you are a small company or a large business, networking can have value for you.

Good luck!

### About the authors



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