

How to Network Effectively

Table of contents

<u>How to network effectively</u>	2
Introduction	2
Benefits of networking	2
Building your network	3
Effective communication	3
Maintaining your network	5
Online networking	5
Using your network	6
What is networking?	7
Helplines	7
Related guides on businesslink.gov.uk	7

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How to network effectively

Subjects covered in this guide

Introduction

Benefits of networking

Building your network

Effective communication

Maintaining your network

Online networking

Using your network

What is networking?

Helplines

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You can find this guide by navigating to:

Home > Sales and marketing > How to network effectively

Introduction

Sharing information, making recommendations and building trust are key to effective networking.

Networking is not about making a “quick sale” but about helping others who, in turn, will help you. In fact, research shows that a referral generates 80% more results than a cold call – because people trust the source of the information.

This factsheet focuses on the practical aspects of networking, looking at how to build, use and maintain your network and covers both face-to-face and online networking.

Benefits of networking

Effective networkers use their networking skills throughout their life – for example, to advance their careers or influence their local community. For businesses, networking is an invaluable tool. The main benefits are:

- Receiving targeted leads and referrals
- Raising awareness of your company
- Sharing ideas and solving business problems
- Building strong relationships and rapport
- Developing potential new business partnerships
- Becoming more influential in your industry (e.g. trade associations actively influence government policy based on members' views)
- Accessing venture capital and finance (e.g. by impressing funders at networking events)

How to network effectively

- Increasing efficiency and productivity (e.g. by having readily available sources of help at your disposal)

Read our guide on how to create your marketing strategy.

Building your network

Good networkers are always on the look out for opportunities to meet and interact with people. The more people you meet, the better your chances of finding the information you need or the leads you want. Even if the person you meet can't help you, they may know someone who can.

Networking events

By attending networking events you get the opportunity to meet people in a safe and supportive environment. There are hundreds of networking events that you can attend, some specifically with the aim of making new business contacts and others with a more structured agenda. Events are often organised by Business Links, trade associations, Chambers of Commerce and other business groups.

As well as meeting new people, networking events can be a good place to re-establish communication with existing contacts. If you know someone who is going to be there arrange to catch up with them at the event.

Trade shows

Exhibiting at a trade show gives you the opportunity to showcase your products and services to potential customers, suppliers and business partners. And – unlike most networking events - because trade shows are geared towards promoting products and creating leads, there is less need to engage

in “small talk” before getting down to business.

Even if you are simply attending a trade show (and not exhibiting) you can still make contacts that lead to new business. Make the best of your time by looking through the trade show materials and writing down a list of the exhibitors you wish to visit. Think about what you want to find out, and consider possible ways that you could work together. Focus on getting a small amount of quality leads, rather than a huge stack of business cards that you will probably never do anything with.

Creating a contacts list

Most salespeople, PR agents and journalists would be lost without their contacts list, but all businesspeople can benefit from creating an up-to-date file of contacts. This could be as simple as storing business cards in an organised manner, but for more effective contact management it is usually a good idea to keep an electronic file of some kind.

Microsoft Outlook has a “Contacts” facility, where you can record all relevant details about your contact as well as track any communications, alternatively you could create a simple spreadsheet. If you are on the move a lot you might prefer to use a Palm Pilot or personal organiser to manage your contacts.

Effective communication

Whether you are a pro at schmoozing or dread the thought of “working a room”, all that you need to be a successful networker are good communication skills. Most people will be just as nervous as you are, and will respond favourably to someone who is

How to network effectively

genuine, interested and non-aggressive.

Meeting people

Before going to a networking event, ask yourself “who do I want to meet and why?”. It might help if you set a goal for the number of people you want to meet, as this will motivate you to leave your “comfort zone” and introduce yourself to new people.

In order to make a good first impression it is important to be prepared and confident. Practise describing you and your business in under 30 seconds, until you get it absolutely right. It is crucial that the person you are speaking to not only gets an accurate picture of what you do but also what makes you different. Ideally, this will grab your listener’s attention and stimulate questions.

Building rapport

Networking is about building genuine relationships, based on trust. Always pay attention to the person you are speaking to – ask questions and be interested in what they are saying, regardless of whether or not you think they could be useful to you.

Allow relationships to grow slowly and naturally. There may be a few people who you instantly “click with”, but most relationships will take time to grow and deepen. Avoid getting too personal too quickly.

Getting to the point

When mingling at a networking event, at some point you want to turn “small talk” into a more focused discussion about business – after all, that is one of the key motivations when networking. Common phrases you can

use to bring “business” into the conversation, include:

- “So what do you do?”
- “What type of business are you in?”
- “How did you get into that industry?”
- “What trends do you see emerging in your industry?”

Handing out business cards

Always have your business card on hand, as you never know when you might need it. However, avoid giving it to just anyone on first meeting them – it is better to wait until you have established a reason for giving them the card.

If you are likely to be meeting a number of contacts at a particular meeting or event, it is a good idea to write down any comments or actions on the backs of the business cards you receive. This way you are certain to remember what you agreed to do for each person.

Closing conversations

In general, when participating at a networking event, people don’t expect conversations to last too long. However, it is important to bow out gracefully – don’t just slip away when the conversation trails to an end. It is much better to give the conversation closure – e.g. by saying “Good to meet you” – or even better by reinforcing any action that you had agreed while talking – e.g. “I’ll email you that article in the morning”.

If you do wish to move on, try not to make it too obvious. One way of ending a conversation is to introduce the person you are talking to, to somebody else in the room. This means you can make a courteous exit.

How to network effectively

Another way to politely end a conversation is to say something like: "It's been great talking to you, good luck with that project you're working on."

Maintaining your network

To get the most out of your network you need to ensure that you dedicate time to "looking after it". The only way to build meaningful relationships is to establish trust – and the best way to do this is by following through and keeping in touch. This shows that you are dependable, responsive, organised and courteous.

Following through

If you say you are going to do something for someone, then it is essential that you follow through. Here are some useful pointers:

- Take immediate action following the initial request or meeting. Not only will the recipient be pleasantly surprised at your promptness, you will also ensure that you don't get a back-log of requests
- Set up a reminder to yourself to complete the request. You can write the action on the back of a business card, leave a voicemail message for yourself, or send a text
- Use email if you are passing on some simple piece of information, such as a telephone number or a link to a website
- Make a follow-up telephone call if you wish to discuss something in more detail
- Send a handwritten note to someone if you are posting them something. Let them know that you enjoyed meeting them and look forward to

catching up again soon.

Re-establishing contact

If you have been out of touch with someone in your network, then it is often worth trying to re-establish contact with a "legitimate" reason:

- Email them an article that you think might interest them
- Send them details about a conference, workshop or event that you think they might like to attend
- Telephone to say you heard something about them (e.g. they were promoted or their business won an award)
- Telephone because you thought it would be nice to "touch base" since it's been a while

Online networking

While some people might think that the internet is too impersonal to build genuine relationships, this attitude is fast changing as online business communities continue to develop and strengthen. The advantages of using an online networking group is the increased reach you will have – both geographically and in terms of the group's experience and resources.

There are a range of online networking tools, including discussion groups, chatrooms, bulletin boards, email, instant messaging and blogs. Whichever type you use, the key is to remember that you are connecting with people. Also, some websites have emerged purely to support online networking, such as eacademy.com and linkedin.com.

Some good rules of thumb for online networking include:

- Be a source of information. Provide others with links, articles or tools that you have found useful
- Join relevant online communities. Make sure they provide the types of opportunities and interactions that you are looking for
- Create an online profile. Look at what other people write to get a feel for the best way to write your bio
- Pace yourself. Avoid joining too many communities at once – as you may not have the time to keep up the momentum

Blogs vs discussion groups

Blogs are basically the online equivalent of networking – they allow people to exchange information, commentary and referrals (web links) by publishing direct to the web (using some easy-to-use software).

The main difference between blogs and discussion groups is the level of visibility and the depth of the interaction. Put simply, if you are looking to raise awareness of your business and make as many new business contacts as possible – your time is better spent posting to a highly visible discussion group. However, if you are looking to develop deep, long-term relationships with a few select contacts then blogs might work for you.

Read our guide on [Email marketing](#).

Using your network

There is no point building up your network if you are not going to use it. You need to be

proactive in supporting your network and, in turn, accepting support. Ideally, this will pay off in terms of the referrals you receive and the partnerships you create. However, networking is not about keeping score – don't expect because you have made 10 referrals that you should receive the same number.

Introducing people

Networking is like a form of viral marketing – if all the people in your network introduce you to just one other person you have effectively doubled your network. And by introducing people you know to others in your network, you benefit by the goodwill this generates, as well as helping to stay fresh in their minds. Even if people don't take you up on your offers or referrals, the act of offering is enough.

Making requests

Don't be afraid to make requests of your network. Whether you want information, ideas, encouragement or recommendations – your network is there to support you. And by making a request of your network, you are effectively giving them permission to ask you for something in return. This will help to strengthen your relationships and keep communication channels open.

If possible, make your requests fit in with the natural flow of conversation, for example, make it sound like an afterthought "Oh, by the way...". Also, avoid using the phrase "Do you know anyone..." as it is easy for the person to say "no". Instead, say something like "Who do you know..." or "What would you recommend...".

When making requests, follow these pointers:

How to network effectively

- Be clear about what you want - there's no point dropping subtle hints, just ask directly
- Be specific – people find it difficult responding to broad or vague requests
- Be succinct – only give people the information they need
- Don't apologise – make the person know that you appreciate their time, but don't apologise for taking it
- Be positive – even if the response is not adequate, it could at least provide a useful starting point
- Try again – if you don't get what you want the first time, ask someone else, or rephrase your request

Read our guide on [Trade shows and exhibitions](#).

What is networking?

In the business arena, networking is about connecting with people in order to share information, resources and leads. The emphasis is on relationship building – getting to know people, finding out how you can help them, and what they can do for you.

Networks rely on word-of-mouth communication and recommendations. The most effective networkers are people who show a genuine interest in others, are willing and enthusiastic to provide help and support, and who always follow-through when they say they are going to do something.

It is important to know the difference between networking and selling. Those people who use networking opportunities to initiate a sales pitch, will not only miss out

on developing the relationship, but will also probably blow the sale. If in doubt, avoid the hard-sell unless you have been specifically invited to discuss your products and services.

Read our guide on how to [Reach your customers effectively](#).

Helplines

Business Link in London

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