

Networking

Networking is an invaluable tool that anyone in the business world can utilize. Effective networking can be your best form of marketing, as well as being extremely affordable. To give a definition of networking, networking occurs when there is a planned event or gathering with the primary goal of connecting with others. The purpose of networking can vary based on one's own agenda, yet the primary focus is to meet people, and have people meet you. In other words, you have the opportunity to market yourself and your business in a relaxed, social situation. This often proves to be a comfortable situation for all involved.

There are many opportunities to network in virtually every community on some scale. For a new owner of a small business, usually the most productive starting point would be to contact a local chamber of commerce or other organization that suits your field of business. Most chambers of commerce and professional organizations have membership dues that can be a considerable amount of money. To make sure that the organization is right for you before you join and pay dues, it is usually acceptable to request to visit the group first as a guest at no charge. This will enable you to get to know the group, get the feel of the group, and make sure it is right for you without putting out any money first.

You may want to visit, and possibly join, several chambers or organizations, but whatever you choose to do, it will only be effective if you use it. Regular attendance at the meetings is extremely important for effective networking. As you attend the meetings, you will be recognized by more and more people as well as getting to know more and more people, and this facilitates you reaching your goal. People will know you and your company and refer to you, and you will do the same for them to reciprocate. Personal referrals and word of mouth advertising is invaluable and highly effective.

To make the most of your networking meeting, here are a few guidelines you should follow:

- **Arrive early.** If you are there before the mass of the group, you are assured the maximum opportunity to meet everyone.
- **Arrive with a goal in mind.** Before the meeting, set a goal for yourself for that day, and then achieve it. Don't arrive at the meeting feeling lackadaisical or unfocused. Take some time for yourself to get yourself focused before the meeting.
- **Make sure you have writing materials and plenty of business cards and/or brochures.**
- **Make sure you have a purse or briefcase** to deposit the materials and business cards that you will accumulate.
- **Make sure to shake hands when introduced, or when you introduce yourself.**

- **Don't huddle up with co-workers or friends.** It is easier to be approached by others if you don't appear to be busy with idle conversation.
- **Don't be afraid to approach people you don't know, and introduce yourself.**
- **Wear a name tag or business card.**
- **Don't hard sell yourself or your company.** Networking meetings are to be social and semi-informal/relaxed.
- **Do your best to remember names of individuals you have met.**

While it is important to prepare for your meeting by following the preceding criteria, it is also very important to prepare by making sure your personal appearance is appropriate for the gathering. Your appearance is the first thing people notice. Unfortunately, lasting impressions can be formed about you or your company before you even open your mouth based solely on your appearance. Because of this, it is important to pay attention to this detail. Some points you may want to note would be to:

- **Have a good haircut.**
- **Wear clothes that are setting-appropriate.**
- **Wear clothes that fit properly.**
- **Pay attention to detail.** Make sure you don't have a snag in your stockings or stain on your blouse, for example.
- **Most importantly: be yourself.** If you are comfortable with your appearance, your confidence will surely be a benefit.

After the meeting, it is important that you follow up with the people you have met in a timely manner. If someone was interested in your company, don't wait two or three weeks to drop them a line; they may have forgotten you by then. Also, it is very important to follow through on any promises you may have made. If you told someone you would call them with some information, make sure you do it! It is very important to be credible and reliable in order for your networking efforts to be truly fruitful.

Networking can be costly in fees, dues, luncheons, etc., but if done effectively, it can prove to be an invaluable investment in your business's success.