

Let The Games Begin (intro to networking)

1. Let the Games Begin

Begin with a purpose – an objective of WHY you are networking/

- Is it to secure one new client?
- Is it to create name recognition, more awareness of your company?
- Is it to begin a referral network?

If you enter into a networking situation with no goal – you are far more likely to flounder like a fish out of water rather than a fish swimming with a focus.

2. Name Your Game

Name Tag – Unless you are left-handed, wear your nametag to the right of your lapel – or on your right side underneath your shoulder. When you engage in hand shaking – your tag will be highly visible.

3. Hands-Ready?

Hand-shake – Ok – here is where you make your first mark. Say that you are professional and reliable in the first 5 seconds. Keep your handshake firm, quick and solid. A limp or long-lasting handshake can imply insecurity and inconsistency. Face it – even if you detest the feel of others' skin and would rather “snake” your hand through the other's- refrain! Your handshake makes a lasting first impression, so make it strong, solid - effective.

4. Going up!

OK – when you are ready – use the elevator speech – some say this is what you do in 30 seconds or less. We are busier than ever – I say this is the description you use of your business - which is 15 seconds or less. Rehearse this BEFORE you go. Say it in front of a mirror. Watch yourself as you describe your business. Are you delivering the message you want to deliver? Remember it is not just WHAT you do, but HOW what you do HELPS others. It usually is no more than 2 spoken sentences. Hint/Example:

- I work as a plumber for the North East Region, (simple)
- Working in the North East Region I specialize in quick solutions for people suffering from plumbing nightmares. *(humorous)
- Mostly for the Northeast region, I find my customers really like the “time-savings” I allow them by solving their plumbing issues usually within 24 hours of their call. (Longer- but speaking to value – and specific needs – more conversational.)
- I come to the “pipe” rescue of many residents (businesses) in the North East Region – I am plumber. And what do you do?” (Again humor – placing clients need/values before your “title.”)

5. Round and Round – Here we Go!

Many experts will tell you to spend no more than 5 minutes with each person. I will offer a twist on this advice. If you find you are “connecting” with someone who either has great potential as a client or to refer you – spend more time (10 – 15 minutes if needed) with this person asking insightful, open-ended questions and then move on. We can make this event a contest of gathering business cards or we can be an investigator looking for the MOST valuable clues for success in building our networking community.

6. Playing with the right partners?

Walk in as if you know at least 5 people there. Feel it – believe it – you will wear it in your smile. This becomes magnetic for others to seek you out for networking.

If you can – find out who will be at the event – either specific people or industry-related vendors. Know who will benefit you most. Hone in on them in the crowd and attempt to make connection with these people first.

If you don't know who they are – seek out the event sponsor – greeter – association staff members who can point out these people- or better yet introduce you to them.

If none of the above works – find people, also alone and speak with them. Power in numbers – it may easier for your nerves. * Hi, I am (XX) and I was trying to find the XX vendor – do you know the layout here today?”

Seek out tables where traffic is high and introduce yourself to the lead vendor at that table.

7. Bundle of Nerves?

Ok – so maybe the game is scaring you. Why not try another approach? Volunteer for the next networking meeting – become part of the organizing mechanism. You will then have a role – and be able to “meet & Greet” with more confidence.

8. You're not a reporter but you play one on TV.

So you have found a few interesting prospects. Listen. Learn. Genuinely be interested. Ask insightful, open-ended questions. And when time is up –exit with realistic reasons:

1. It was nice meeting you, but please excuse me I need to visit the restroom. (You have no need for this person's business card at this time)
2. Let's continue this over coffee – I see a client of mine – but would love to learn more. Do you have a card?
3. This has been really encouraging – your business sounds so exciting. I really want to learn more but I see someone I must talk to before the end of the day. Do you have a card? Perhaps we can do lunch next week?
4. It was truly a pleasure meeting you. I see a colleague but hope to see you again at the next function. (You have no need for this person's business card at this time.)

9. Lights, Camera Action!

Ok, so you are doing your best at “being the reporter.” Contrary to what you may think – be prepared with your elevator speech – but don't spend too much time giving it. Really play the reporter. Be the detective. Not only does asking questions relax the other person – but also you may just learn some very valuable information. Common questions to ask:

- So, what is it that you do, (insert name to help you remember)
- How long have you been in this industry?
- So whom do you typically work with?
- Are your clients local, regional or national?
- How did you get into this field?
- What kinds of problems do you (your company) normally solve?
- Have you found any seminars helpful lately?
- You mentioned some things that hit home to me. I also experience that () with many of my clients. It would be nice to get together for lunch or coffee. Maybe we could swap solutions for these situations. Do you have a card?
- Yes, I have actually heard of that before with clients in your area. Actually I have even worked on some projects that were very closely aligned with what you are talking about. I would be happy to share some of my ideas with you over coffee if you would like?
- Sounds like a fascinating industry. Do you see a lot of change coming or do you think this next quarter will be business as usual?
- Do you ever use interns? I have and..... or I have been advised to and am wondering about the pros and cons....
- If you see a fit – share a client story – see if this person(s) has had a similar experience. FIND COMMON GROUND if you can.

Remember: Be a source of information for others – and use them as a source of information for you. Can you solve any of their problems – maybe not directly but by emailing them the name of a vendor you know? Might they know of others who need your services? Might they or you - know of other networking opportunities? Are they potential partners for a future project or to share a vendor table at an upcoming event?

Having this outlook or approach vs. heading in to close a sale sets up the potential for a realistic long-term networking community. It can make the transition of walking into the room easier. Your goals are more strategic – long-term and not as deadline oriented. And finally – practice. Keep going to those events you feel worthy but don't waste time on others just because the donuts look good. Also - a seminar or workshop can have as much potential for resources as a staged “networking” session. Ask others where they found success in their networking and keep notes.

About the Author

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