

When networking and presenting meet

Networking opportunities are ever present in the business world. These include seminars, workshops, working breakfasts, evening dinners as well as more organised local events. Whether it is the Round Table, Chamber of Commerce or the village church restoration supporters group, you need to have an eye for the network opportunities. Other articles will offer advice about different approaches to match the occasion – for example subtle at the social occasion is always a good option. However, the focus is always to increase the number of people who know you, or of you, and in a positive warm and often reciprocal way. This last point is important. The successful networker is not a taker, but a sharer. Involved, engaging and approachable are good attributes to foster carefully.

You are probably already familiar with network groups through family, school, university as well as church, sport or other gatherings. You may not have seen them as networks in the same way as the pure business network model, but they are pretty similar and certainly as useful. Indeed to neglect the more social, more informal networks is something to be avoided. However the focus for this article is the professional or business network that is further along the formal end of the networking continuum.

I will examine some key areas where you can score heavily on the network chart, without doing more than polishing up a few skills, becoming network orientated in your thinking, and open to opportunities as they present themselves.

Business cards and names

Nothing impresses us more to know that someone knows who we are. I write as someone who has struggled for years with name-recall difficulties. I still do, but I am substantially better than I was in the past. Always start from knowing the correct name. Listen, clarify and check names especially those that seem less straightforward. Be careful not to alter names. David might not like to be called Dave, whereas Michelle might prefer Shelly. If in doubt, ask. Write names down, make discreet notes and try to use new acquaintances' names in conversation as soon as possible. Regular use will help install the names.

Just as you want to know the names of other people, you want them to remember and know your name. When I first got my individual business cards printed I thought they were magical, precious and I guarded them carefully. It was several years later that I realised that my business cards had no value at all unless other people had them. This does not mean take the confetti approach, but does mean always offering a card when appropriate, and always have some with you. Neat, clean, not dog-eared and tired cards! As you accept cards, at the earliest opportunity jot a note on the back to help remind you of the person who gave you it.

What do you do?

This is so often an opening line in a conversation as well as the standard first item on the business meeting agenda at network events. Of course you can answer it... Can't you? Often this is where the opportunities are lost. Initially the question is almost rhetorical. Like "how are you?" it seeks an answer but in an almost disinterested way. Presentation skills to the rescue. The 'what do you do' question is one of a number of mini 'elevator' speeches - little short sharp and impressive responses that you can enhance with presentation skills training, rehearsal and indeed by merely recognising the power of a strong response, which in turn, will motivate you to give one.

A response along the lines of, "Well, I, er, sort of er run courses and er teach things to people in London as well as, er wherever they work to, um help them communicate", is not going to win any medals. Much better would be something like, "I run courses to teach professional business people at all levels how to address an audience, deliver powerful presentation and engage effectively with clients, colleagues and audiences." Clear, precise, said with enthusiasm and conviction and imparts good information that the recipient can then respond to with further questions.

Speaking in public

Of course the elevator speech is one opportunity: there are others involving bigger audiences for longer periods of time. I am regularly invited to speak at local events, professional dinners, and training seminars. At these events speaking skills are required if you are going to make network connections. The reverse is true as well. If your speaking lets you down, then expect that to impact on the overall perception that others will have of you. After all, when you hear a confident speaker doesn't that automatically imply confidence in other aspects of their life? If you hear a speaker making something of a shambles out of a speech, you will likely think twice before considering any business opportunities with them.

Don't be frightened of offering to speak at events. Until your diary is packed with engagements, smaller events have a real value. They still offer the chance to network, alongside offering the chance to improve, enhance and hone your speaking skills. Most 'big name acts' in the entertainment field started in pubs and clubs. Most well known speakers started with local groups. No-one starts at the top, and the experiences on the way up are invaluable.

Getting it right

There is a well know saying that NLP borrowed: "If you always do what you always do, you will always get what you always got". We all speak naturally. Speaking and presenting are two different things. In almost every other business skill, you will receive training. Presentation skills, until recently, has not been top of everyone's list and hence the number of presentations that are rather poor. Research suggests that a substantial amount of all business presentations are felt to be unsatisfactory by the audience. It is not a quantum leap of thinking that most of the poor presentations are delivered by those who have received no training. We then inflict their underwhelming abilities onto others and wonder why we lose contracts, fail to win new clients and have uninspiring meetings and events.

With a little encouragement the 'always get' cycle can be broken to create a new mentality that will add a vibrancy to your meetings, an efficiency to your training and an enthusiasm to all aspects of your public speaking. There should be nothing stopping you from achieving

Rules and guidance

Bearing in mind this is an article about aspects of networking, let me use another adage that will be helpful to you. Less is more. When networking of course you want to mention your company and the temptation is the hard sell. Trust me; doing so will not put you in a good light. Networking involves people. Get to know them, let them get to know you. Your skills, areas of knowledge and expertise will lead them to your company when the time is right. If your networking and presenting falls into the category of junk mail...then expect it to be binned. Make an impact, don't just advertise. Be patient and recognise that this is a medium-term strategy that might have some short term results as well.

Be prepared to listen, offer help and to give and take. Recognise the value in everybody. There may well be a couple of 'hot' contacts but share yourself with everyone. Today's quiet junior executive may well be tomorrow's high flying .star. Or they might just mention your name in the right place, or to the right person. Even the short phrase. "This is what I do, if I can ever help, call me", can pay dividends in time.

And finally

Like all good presentations, an article should have a conclusion and a call for action! Almost any marketing or business development book stresses the importance of networking as a positive action to take. It is not rocket science to follow that suggestion further by saying that positive networking is required and that is achieved by making the best use of the opportunities to speak both individually and to groups. To learn more about presentation skill training, and how to become a competent, interesting speaker, you need to attend a course delivered by an expert. Now then, may I give you my card...if I can ever be of help, please do call me!

About the author

Ian Price left Local Government work after 26 years and set up Business Training Direct - a company that specialises in presentation skills training. Providing a range of courses to suit all levels of knowledge and experience, Ian's training will ensure a high standard of competence is obtained in a short period of time. There are options for public courses, in-house courses and one2one coaching. Ian is also a trained hypnotherapist and can offer addition work when nerves and anxiety threaten to get out of control. Further details are on the website at www.businesstrainingdirect.co.uk or you can contact Ian via email at ian@businesstrainingdirect.co.uk.