

HAPPY NEW NETWORKER

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Networking is vital to our career and commercial success, but few of us do it naturally. Being a confident and effective networker will, therefore, set you apart from the crowd. It will raise your profile, help you to feel more in control and create more opportunities for you to advance yourself and develop your business' interests.

But most of us find it a challenge. In 2005, a survey found that 60 per cent of the reason why individuals rose to the top in large organisations was because they were seen more often by more people.

How visible are you? Do you do a great job but stay hidden within the confines of your department? When you are at the coffee machine, do you strike up conversations with other colleagues from other departments?

Most accountants have to be pulled kicking and screaming into attending events that have the sole objective of winning new business. "Don't make me sell; I'm a professional!" they protest. But their real problem with it usually stems from the following three factors:

- The fear of failure.
- The fear of rejection.
- The fear of leaving your comfort zone.

Why you need to network

Even if winning new clients is not part of your job description, you will still need to get out there and meet people. Networking is simply a case of building relationships. The key reasons you should be attending business events, internal or external, are to:

- Meet likely recruits.
- Find potential suppliers.
- Hear new ideas.
- Share problems and help others.
- Increase awareness of your company.
- Seed feedback on your services.
- Learn about the competition.
- Keep up to date with business information.
- Understand your business' markets.
- Increase your self confidence in new areas.
- Correct any wrong perceptions.
- Gain introductions to useful contacts.

Overcoming your fears

The way we think, feel and behave comes down to our self-esteem. This is, in essence, the relationship we have with ourselves. The extent to which you like and

value yourself often reflects the way others see you. When you attend social or business events, what do you think as you walk into the room?

- Am I good enough?
- Will I be judged and found wanting?
- Will I fail?
- Will I be ignored?
- Will I be taken seriously?
- Will I do or say something that makes me look stupid?
- Will I be asked something and not know the answer?

How nice are you?

Most of us enter social situations thinking about our own imperfections and faults, rather than the fact that we are nice people. Generations of English teachers have told us to avoid using the “N” word, but when you are attending events being nice is more likely to mean that others will acknowledge and include you. Books and courses will tell you that a good networker is approachable, friendly, affable, agreeable, likable, personable etc.

Walk into the room knowing that you are as good as anyone there, even if you are not the richest, most experienced or most senior person in attendance. A nice person has a generous spirit and the greatest gift you can give is time. Spend more time in conversation being interested than interesting. People love to talk about themselves; nice people let them. Listen to what they say and react appropriately. Do not hijack a conversation. Work hard on your active listening; do not simply wait for the other person to stop talking.

There are three fundamental steps to building relationships:

- Getting to know people.
- Creating mutual liking (at the very least, concealing dislike).
- In the longer term, progressing to building mutual trust.

When you have low self-esteem, you cannot like or trust yourself and people will see this. You can never be better on the outside than you believe you are on the inside. Your body language will say it all and you will struggle when entering a room full of strangers.

Some people think that the opposite of self-deprecation must be arrogance. Wrong: self belief manifests itself through liveliness and charm. If you are not enthusiastic about what you do and the firm you do it for, why should others want to be associated with you and your business? If you act enthusiastically you quickly become enthusiastic.

Basic preparation

Consider the fundamentals: who will be at the event? Where will it be held? What will you wear? What is the format? Have you got business cards to hand? This is only the start.

Before you walk into the room, give yourself a good talking to. Remember that you are a nice, giving person. Think about your strengths, your achievements and how you have achieved your present position: you have a service or product that's valuable to others; you represent a business that is worth representing. Be ready to accept compliments and always thank the giver in a genuine manner.

Remember that everyone is there to create potential opportunities. They want to meet you as much as you want to meet them. Most people will be as nervous as you are and most will be polite, courteous and respectful. There will be a small minority of rude people. Do not let them ruin your event. Simply move on to nice, welcoming people. No one can make you self-confident merely by telling you to be so when you attend an event. But everyone can play to their strengths.

Following up

When you ask the right questions and listen carefully, you will often hear something useful. Whether this is a new business opportunity, new information or the possibility of a new job, you need to follow it up.

Meeting someone at an event is the start of a relationship. It is not generally a time to do serious business; that comes later. Ask the other person for their business card and permission to contact them afterwards to arrange a further meeting. Where possible, agree a date and write it down on the back of their card so that they will expect your call.

Networking takes practice. But, with a little preparation and perseverance, it can make a valuable contribution to your career and your company.