

Power Network like a Pro!

"You can have everything in life you want if you will just help enough other people get what they want." - Zig Ziglar

One of the most basic, but essential skills for any business owner is developing a robust professional network. While most professionals acknowledge the importance of networking, few actually do it, and even fewer do it well. If you've ever wondered how to grow your professional network or how to leverage your network to increase business, this article is for you!

A *network* refers to a collection of individuals or organizations which are all connected in some manner. Networking then refers to deliberate efforts undertaken to build, grow, and strengthen the quality of individuals and organizations in that network as well as to improve those relationships. A well-developed network can be key to growing a business, recruiting talent, and tapping into valuable peer expertise.

Building a Network.

The first thing a new *networker* needs is a willingness to regularly meet with other professionals and learn about other businesses. While an introductory call can be helpful in getting to know someone, when possible, face-to-face meetings are best. Also, be prepared to listen!

Leave the Heavy Sales Pitch at Home!

One of the biggest mistakes new networkers can make is to relentlessly focus on making a sale instead of getting to know the other party. Regardless of what your sales coach may tell you, networking is not about high-pressure sales. In fact, aggressive sales pitches can be extremely counterproductive - when someone is pushing to sell us something, our "walls" go up and we become very guarded with information. Once we've *retreated* from the discussion, we're reluctant to say much about our business and the other party has lost a valuable opportunity to learn about us (including how they might be able to help us.)

Anatomy of an Effective Networking Meeting.

With 'selling' *off the table*, you may be wondering "what do I talk about?" The simple and effective answer is what we refer to as "The Big 3" – in short, each party should take no more than 20 minutes each to share:

1. **Who are you?**

Speak about your background, experience, and work history. You may choose to share personal information if you'd like but keep this short and business appropriate.

2. **What do you do?**

Speak about what your business does, who you can help, what problems you solve, what products you sell, how long you've been doing it, etc.

3. **Who can I connect you to in my network?**

After briefly covering the previous points, the key question (i.e. *where the rubber meets the road*) is, "who can I connect you to in my network that might be a good strategic introduction?" This can be thought of as next steps and is the primary purpose of the networking meeting. Be sure to ask (and tell) who you're interested in connecting with and what kind of individuals are good referral sources. Also, feel free to share who isn't a good contact.



It's About Relationships.

Successful business owners know that people tend to do business with people they **know, like, and trust**. This sought-after rapport doesn't develop after a single meeting over coffee but is instead nourished through repeated "touchpoints" (i.e. bona fide mutually beneficial opportunities to connect with the other party.) A general rule of thumb is that after 7 to 11 *touches* people know, like, and trust us and that's where the seeds of business are planted.



While many business professionals push out monthly informational newsletters to stay top of mind (*how many newsletters did you have time to read last month?*), great networkers know that the best touchpoints are those which help grow business – specifically, value-added connections.

“But I can't think of any 'buyers' right now...”

A common struggle for many new networkers is tunnel vision – when meeting with a banker, it's likely that they may quickly deduce that they don't know of anyone looking to change their bank at the moment and therefore have no valuable connections to offer today. The problem with this flawed thinking is that we may not find that needle-in-the-haystack client for many months (or even years!) If you wait months to think about someone you meet with today, it is almost certain they will have vanished from your memory. In this common scenario, networking becomes an almost unwinnable numbers game - you are hoping to connect with someone in the stroke of luck that they know someone looking for your services or may encounter that need in the next few weeks.

Instead of playing the numbers game, great networkers know how to look for other opportunities to proactively stay connected (and stay top of mind!) A great way to do this is to ask, “how else can I help your business grow?” While it's common to share who the target customer is, the opportunity to provide value-added connections goes far beyond the customer. Good networkers are able to push beyond the obvious connections (i.e. the customer) to explore other possible connections. 4 common *flavors of connections* are:

1. Potential Clients.

An excellent question to ask the other party is to *draw a 360° view* of what a great customer looks like. While these are always the best connections to share, they may not always be immediately available.

2. Referral Sources / Potential Business Partners.

In breaking free from the tunnel vision that a client is the only good connection, you should focus on understanding who is a good referral source for the other party – where do they get their work from?

3. People Who Want to Meet You.

Just the same as the banker may want to meet accountants and financial advisors because they're a good referral source for him/her, other business professionals may want to meet the banker for the same reason. You should take the meeting if time allows - business is about partnerships and, as suggested above, your business will go far *'if you will just help enough other people get what they want.'*

4. Great Connectors.

The last group which is so often overlooked are the power networkers. Simply put, if you know someone, and that someone knows everyone, that's someone you want to know you. These individuals are usually able to help connect you with anyone you need.

The Drip Method.

Networking should be thought of as a marathon rather than a sprint. While it may be tempting to send out 12 introductory emails as soon as you get back to the office (who doesn't like checking a good-deed off their list), this may create a heavy burden for your new connection who must now respond to and schedule 12 meetings. Also, if your new connection is a *dead-end connection* (someone who does not respond to emails or someone who will not reciprocate), you have little ability to control the situation. Instead, successful networkers recognize the opportunity to spread introductions out over a period of weeks and months. This allows you to ensure that the other party is responding back to the emails in a professional and timely fashion. More importantly, this allows you to easily increase touchpoints and stay top of mind.

Other Pro Tips.

It's usually best to ask each of your contacts in advance if they would be open to you making an introduction for them to help their business. With their approval, ask for a short bio (4-6 sentences... not a bio, not a resume, not a customer-profile, etc.) Just a short introductory paragraph that you can include in an email to make a warm introduction.

Also, when receiving introductions be sure to respond quickly, treat every introduction professionally, and conduct yourself as a professional. Arrive (call) on time, read the introduction and consider researching the other party ahead of time, and be attentive (put your phone away!) The golden rule is that we all want to look like rock stars – when someone makes an introduction for you, make them look good.

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