

How to Prepare Effectively for a Networking Event—Seven Top Tips

Much of our business these days comes from recommendations, referrals, introductions and existing clients coming back for more – that is, through relationships. Done well networking helps you start those relationships and is an effective shortcut to business success.

The Most Important Thing to Remember

Build the relationship before you ask for help. Networking is not about what you can do for me. It's a two-way street. Be prepared to help others without expecting any help in return. It's about relationships. Help others, offer assistance, give them useful resources and they will usually return the favour.

Barriers to Getting the Most from Networking Events

There are barriers that get in our way when it comes to networking events. For example,

- Nerves and feeling overwhelmed by having to meet so many new people at once
- The people at the event seem to be the wrong people – they're not the people you were hoping to meet
- You meet up with a good friend you haven't seen for a while and spend time catching up.

All of these can get in the way of your success. But with careful **PREPARATION** they can be overcome.

1. Make a list of the people you want to meet

Is there a specific person, or type of person that you need to meet? Maybe you're looking for an expert in a particular topic? One of the simplest ways to work out who you need to know is to look at who you already know and how they can help you, and then look at where you want to be. The people you want to meet are the ones who can fill the 'gaps'.

Making a list improves your focus.

I recommend that you make two lists.

- Those you are determined to meet, and
- Those who it would be good to meet.

If you have extra time, you can make more contacts.

2. Find out who's going to be there

It isn't always possible but if you can get a list from the event organisers. Sometimes they will be unwilling or unable to give you a list, but they can probably tell you if a specific person is scheduled to attend.

3. Avoid limiting yourself to a specific industry or sector

Sometimes when we're in a hurry we limit ourselves. Your top connections might come from within your industry, but there are often influential people outside of the sector and it's worth investing a bit of time to identify a couple of them and meet up. They increase your chance of spreading your influence more widely. It's the networking equivalent of "going viral".

4. Know your story and who exactly you are telling it to

Work out what you want to say to each of your "must meet" people. A lot of people recommend that you have a prepared elevator pitch and this is useful for many meetings. But when you really want to build a relationship with someone, make the effort to tailor your pitch to what you know about them and their needs. Focus on skills and solutions rather than your job title. And remember, writing your pitch, actually physically putting it onto paper or a screen, helps you clarify your ideas.

Tailoring your pitch is a winning strategy that will boost your networking success. Practice your pitch before the event. And make sure you keep it short – about 10 seconds.

5. Choose the right clothes

Work out what you are going to wear. Choose clothes that

- You feel comfortable in
- Are clean and well-pressed
- Fit well.

Also think about what you might be carrying. How are you going to access your business cards, manage handshakes, and maybe a pen? What if you want to enjoy a drink, or something to eat, at the same time? What do you really need to carry with you? If you need a handbag, it's useful to have one with a shoulder strap.

6. yourself a pep talk

Do you hide at the edge of a room, burying your head in someone's sales literature or staring thoughtfully at your drink? Give yourself a pep talk before you the event. Remember your purpose. Make sure you are mentally prepared to deal with networking, even if you know that you these events make you uncomfortable. Practice looking straight ahead, rather than down. Remember that you are probably on someone else's list of people to meet and go forward with confidence, or at least the appearance of it. It may be tiring, but it's just for a couple of hours.

If you're really overwhelmed by these events, set yourself a target. Aim to meet the top three people on your list and once you've done that, if you don't feel up to continuing, call it quits. You've achieved a lot by meeting three new people.

7. Set a time limit

Sometimes we meet old friends, or make contact with someone we really like, at networking events. Remember your purpose. To avoid monopolising their time, or using all of your available time with them, set a time limit for each interaction. Tell yourself that when you meet person A on your list, you will spend at most 10 to 15 minutes with them and then move on to person B. This is what the event is for. When you want a long chat with someone, you can make a time to catch up with them at a later date.