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The real circle of life.....

By **Jack Downton**

Do you come here often?

It is often said that a clever person knows lots of things, but a successful person knows lots of people. While intelligence, hard work and a bit of luck all play their part in reaching the top, if your black book has fewer people in it than a Fred Goodwin appreciation party, then it's time to put on your glad rags and head on out.

Just as a computer network is a group of interconnected computers, those that work in the City too need to connect with potential clients and referrers if they are to bring in more work to their companies. Networking in 2009 can exist in a variety of formats – from LinkedIn, to Facebook, to Friends Reunited - yet nothing can beat the impact of meeting face to face. A business card exchanged at a party can put you in contact with people that just may come in handy, both now and in the years ahead.

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, many dread networking events and find the prospect of talking to a room full of strangers uncomfortable and even stressful.

Thankfully, however, a bit of practice, and a few tips, can improve anyone's networking skills.

Prep up

Those who turn up to corporate events with no idea of the kind of people who might be there, or what they want to achieve, may as well have stayed at home and watched *University Challenge*. Those I have trained are often surprised to learn that a little preparation can pay dividends. By turning up without a focus, you're more likely to stand on your own munching nibbles. Yet by deciding in advance what you want to achieve, you are much more likely to leave with several worthwhile business cards.

Impression

It is often said that an initial impression is made within ten seconds of meeting someone. You've probably just arrived here straight from work, on the Jubilee line, wedged between tourists with backpacks and commuters who refuse to wear deodorant. It is therefore worthwhile checking your appearance before you enter the room.

As you enter, smile and make eye contact. This is engaging and gives you an aura of confidence. Have in mind some ice breakers to initiate conversations: the size of the room, the amount of people there, *University Challenge*, anything to kick start a conversation.

Ready, aim, fire

When considering who to approach, choose carefully: parties of two might not welcome a third person; those stood on their own with no one to talk to may be stood on their own for good reason. A group of

three or more therefore is probably the best option, and you should always try to approach with a smile and having made eye contact with the member of the group you judge as leading the conversation.

Group circle

People like hearing their own name. It sounds friendly and establishes rapport. Therefore in conversation, use people's names as soon as you hear them. If not offered, don't be hesitant in asking for people's names. Asking for names later in conversation is often awkward.

Before discussing the type of work you are involved in use small talk to earn people's trust and establish that vital initial rapport. Also have prepared an answer to the inevitable question "And what do you do?" Prepare an answer that succinctly details and shows the benefit of what you do. Be ready to give further information if people want it and speak with enthusiasm about the work you do.

Star performance

Many people's perception of City workers (bankers, lawyers, etc) is of someone who likes to take centre stage and command the undivided attention of everyone else. Yet avoid temptation to monopolise conversation. No matter how interesting your topic, do give everyone else the chance to take part. By allowing others in the group to have a greater speaking role, you learn a lot about the other person, you don't have to do the talking (so there's no chance of being thought of as boring), and the other people feel important and remember a lively exchange with you.

Business cards are an important step in the process and they can be exchanged at any time. If given early in the conversation, they can be used as a way of initiating dialogue; if given later, it underlines a genuine interest in the people you were talking to.

After the event, you need to follow up and that's difficult if you don't have their card. Consider hand-written notes for maximum impact. And lastly bear in mind that while these events can prove a great way of making business contacts, they can also prove a great way of making friends you can call upon for a variety of reasons.

And in the words of fellow networking expert Bob Burg "It isn't just what you know. It isn't just who you know. It's actually who you know, who knows you and what you do for a living."

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