

The Art of Networking

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Face-to-face networking at industry events is still one of the best ways to establish relationships from which business may well flow, particularly in the insurance world. At the end of the day, people still buy people. Networking opportunities are frequently missed because people either don't know how to overcome their worries about talking to strangers, or go into high-powered selling-mode.

Walking into a room full of strangers is a daunting prospect even for the most experienced of insurance professionals. You know you have to meet people, make new contacts, network, yet the sight of all these unknown faces in a room already arranged happily into pairs and groups clutching their coffee cups can make you want to turn round, huddle in a corner and spend this valuable time tweeting on your BlackBerry.

Preparation is the key to networking successfully at a seminar or exhibition. Sending delegates to an industry conference, especially overseas, is a considerable expense. The cost is higher still for firms or entities that set-up stalls or host a reception. This outlay is an investment and should be repaid by the additional work that is generated. Wafting around a room hoping to bump into someone significant, or talking to friends and contacts you already know, isn't going to cut it. To ensure you get a bang from your buck, conference attendees need a plan.

Who is going to be there? Get hold of a list of exhibitors, speakers and attendees. Identify who you would like to meet and set yourself a reasonable target. If you are attending a reception, for example, aim to meet four or five people during the evening.

While it can sometimes be important just to be seen around at industry events, to remind people who you are, reconnect with contacts and meet colleagues based abroad, establishing an objective of meeting a set number of new people from companies you don't yet work with, or from markets where you don't yet have a presence, is a very good way of getting a constructive and concrete measure of success from event attendance.

When the inevitable moment comes to enter the room, introduce yourself and start a conversation, resist the temptation to launch into a long diatribe about what you do. Lots of people at the same event will all be trying to create the same good impression. The usual method is to spray information about yourself and what you do and hope that some of it sticks, talking about me, me, and me... The aim of networking is to build relationships – this is not the way to do it.

You want to be remembered as someone worthwhile. Showing that you are interested in the people you speak to, and not just interested in speaking about yourself, can have massive benefits. Differentiate yourself from the crowd by being the person who shows they can listen, understand the other person's business and focus on how they can really help – and not just leap straight into a sales spiel. People tend to trust and like people that have shown an interest in them.

Before you can start a conversation, the first hurdle is to join a group. Even when you don't know anyone, there are some physical clues that indicate who is willing to be approached. Look for an open pair: a couple who aren't directly facing each other - one may be scanning the room looking for other people (but beware: the person could be looking for an escape route. It may be a sign that his or her partner is boring!).

A group is the most rewarding place to make new contacts and yet it is probably the most frightening prospect. Approach it as you would a roundabout. You pause to check that the traffic is clear, but after a while you just have to be brave, press the accelerator and pull out. Walk up to the group smartly, making eye contact with the person who seems to be leading the group conversationally. Don't begin by apologizing: "I'm sorry but may I join you", for example, but join the group with a clear statement of intent "May I join you?" Very few groups will actually turn round and say no.

Friendly groups will tend to tell you what they were talking about so that you can pick up the subject and join in. However, in some cases your arrival may form an unnecessary interruption to their conversational flow and you should try to pick up the conversation to reunite the group. Choose something that has a common denominator, possibly the event itself: ask how people are finding it.

Rather than worrying about what to say in these situations, concentrate on planning some questions to ask. What questions would you like to be asked? What would get you talking? Clearly, your preparation can help you here. If you have targeted a number of attendees and done your homework you will be able to ask some very relevant questions. But leaping straight into business talk is a swift way to derail a budding relationship. Start with small talk and build-up. Politics, sport and cultural issues can all provide a starting point.

When the conversation does turn towards business, don't switch on the sales talk. It may feel as if that's why you attended the event in the first place, but bite your tongue. Turn the conversation away from yourself, ask about the other person's business, explore, listen, dig-deeper and get under the skin of their business before you start to investigate how you might be able to help. When talking about your own business, back up your claims and give a couple of examples – it helps bring what you do to life and adds credibility.

The five most common errors at conferences and exhibitions are:

- 1. Spending too long talking to friends and colleagues.**
- 2. Launching into a sales spiel.**
- 3. Talking too much about yourself. If you did the most talking, you didn't spend enough time listening.**
- 4. Not having the confidence to join groups or the courage to be honest when leaving them.**
- 5. Forgetting people's names. Repeat a person's name occasionally when addressing them during the conversation and if you forget, ask and ask quickly. The embarrassment is only on your part and the longer you leave it the worse it will get. To help other people remember your name wear your name badge on your lapel or**

collar where it can be seen, especially if you are a little bit short. Women should consider pinning their badge to the strap of the handbag high-up on their shoulder.

At the end of the event you want to be remembered as a nice person, somebody totally authentic and honest, quietly confident and worth knowing. You want to be memorable for good reasons. Living in an increasing virtual world, practical face-to-face networking skills can be considered to give people an edge. The more that we conduct international business from behind a desk and research contacts using social media, the more people will rely on those contacts they have actually met and who have made an indelible good impression.

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