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Tanya Roberts • May. 07, 2015



Believe it or not, most successful business people I know dread networking. It just doesn't come naturally to a majority of people. Instead, it feels awkward and uncomfortable. For many years, I avoided networking all together.

But, there comes a point when you have to embrace networking as a necessary work skill that helps you move ahead. It is a great way to gain new clients. It can help you

recruit new employees or find new partners. It can help you become a noted and

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Before

Research – Take the time to research the organization that is hosting the networking event. Look up its past and upcoming events and items that will be of importance for the group's members. Also, familiarize yourself with board members or volunteers listed on the organization's website. Recognizing faces can help you easily open conversations. Finally, identify what types of businesses are typically represented at these events and make a "wish list" of what companies you'd like to make contacts at.

Find an ambassador – Tap a contact who is a member of the organization and ask that person to introduce you around. Work with your contact ahead of time to detail what types of people you'd like to talk with and what sort of companies you target. (Don't forget to send your ambassador a thank you note or small gift afterwards!)

Prepare – Have five standard questions prepped as your go-to conversation starters. That way, you aren't struggling for icebreakers when you meet someone new. Here are some of my conversation openers:

- How are you connected with this organization? When did you join? What sparked you to join?
- What do you do for a profession? How long have you been doing it? What inspired you to go this direction? What do you enjoy about your work?
- Do you live in this area? How long have you lived here? Where are you originally from? Where else have you lived?

There are a lot of websites with lists of other questions you can pose to keep a conversation going. Just search for "icebreakers" and dozens pop up.

Likewise, practice a short description of your firm and what you do so you can easily share that with interested parties.

During

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Ask – Embrace a “pay it forward” mentality by asking about a contact's business, what they do and what sorts of clients they look for. It often encourages the contact to reciprocate.

Invite – Don't close off your conversations. Invite other networkers nearby to join in. Facilitate dialogue by introducing yourself and your contact.

Request – Request a business card during conversations. Take the time to review it and use the information to open new lines of dialogue. Commenting or questioning on interesting logo or name of a business is a great way to learn more about someone's company. One important note: Try not to give out large amounts of your cards but rather share them in a meaningful way.

After

Show appreciation – Reach out to your new contacts with a “nice to meet you” handwritten note or email. No matter what form of communication you choose, be sure to include your business card or contact information.

Track – Create a database or system that tracks new contacts, where you met them and notes about them. Build a plan on how you'd like to reach out to them on a regular basis. This could be anything from a regular lunch for serious prospective clients or a quarterly “touch base” with potential influencers.

Follow up – During the course of your conversations, did you promise a contact that you'd send along information later? Perhaps it was an interesting article or your high-level tax or financial advice. It could even be an apple pie recipe. If you said you would follow up with *anything at all*, be sure to do so promptly. Likewise, if contacts from the event are kind enough to refer clients to you, make sure you act on those referrals immediately and thank the individual for the referral.

The right combination of preparation, consideration and tenacity can bypass the

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green transportation technology company, as well as acting Vice President of Marketing for Drivewyze, a leading technology provider for commercial vehicle operators. She also held leadership roles at Intuit, SugarSync and PayCycle, Bill.com CEO and founder René Lacerte's first successful start-up. Tanya holds a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Denver. Outside of Bill.com, she enjoys entertaining, hiking, biking and volunteering for St. Vincent de Paul.

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