

Business Networking for Startups

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What is business networking?

On your phone you have an address book. As well as your family, your friends, the local pizza delivery service (or is that just me?), you've probably got the numbers and contact details for your clients, suppliers and advisers? If you've been in business a while you may have many contacts in there. If you're just starting out there might not be quite as many. Yet.

Business networking is the simplest way of growing your personal network. Those trusted suppliers, invaluable advisers and, of course, customers and clients that will fill up your address book are out there. You just haven't met them yet.

You're already networking if you're in business by talking to other people about your business. People at the school gates, or pub, or pizza takeaway (I should get out more).

Business networking usually means events that put a number of business owners together. Often over breakfast, lunch or dinner, or sometimes over drinks or coffee.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of networking events.

"Open" networking - where there is a room full of people and you mingle and chat and exchange cards.

Structured events where typically, everyone present has a chance to speak about their business briefly (for 40 seconds typically) and then 121 meetings are arranged between the attendees in the room.

At both types of event there is also usually a speaker, typically picked from the members of the organisation.



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Why you should consider networking

What's missing in your business right now?

- Clients?
- Prospects?
- Suppliers?
- People to help you move the business forward?
- People to talk to when you're having a rubbish day (or to brag to when you're having a brilliant day).

Business networking gives you the opportunity to meet a lot of people, and choose who you want to work with. Business networking gives you the chance to build a virtual team around you, find prospects, clients and suppliers and take advice from people more experienced in business than you, or with experience in a different field.

Any marketing activity you undertake as a business is likely to be geared to ultimately meeting the person you have addressed the marketing to. Business networking is a short cut to getting in front of people quickly, and in a friendly and neutral environment.

Where to look for events

The sponsors of this guide, 4Networking, have a free iPhone and Android app which will find 4Networking events near you literally at the click of a button. Just search "4Networking Meeting Finder" on either the iTunes App Store or the Google Play Store, download it and away you go.

Alternatively visit their website 4Networking.biz and their "Book a Meeting" page allows you to search for groups near you or based on the date the group runs on. 4Networking run over 5,000 breakfast, lunch and evening meetings a year. If there isn't a group near you currently, call 4Networking HQ on 0845 123 4444 and ask for details of starting a group yourself - it's a terrific way of building your profile and network locally.

You can also contact your local Chamber of Commerce to see if they run any networking events locally, or simply ask your contacts which groups they attend.

And if all of the above fails - try Googling "business networking" plus the name of your town.

Before the event

Any networking event will provide you with opportunities to grow your business, so it is VERY worthwhile being prepared in advance. Here are some top tips to ensure you make the most of the event.

- **Business cards** - I know we live in 2014. I know that we all keep all of our contact details in our phones BUT business people still expect other business people to have business cards. At some networking events the formal passing of business cards is part of the event itself. Get some printed - and pay for them. Nothing undersells your business more than "Printed for free by" on the back of your cards.
- **Your 40 second introduction** - At most business events you will have chance to introduce you and your business to the other people in the room. 4Networking events start with the "40 second round" where each attendee takes turns to introduce themselves. It is extremely worthwhile having a prepared introduction. You would prepare any other marketing material in advance and this should be no different. The chapter of Business Networking for Dummies which deals with this subject in detail is available for free - just go to noredbraces.cvo.uk/free for details.

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- **A notebook - Or Evernote, or your preferred application for making quick notes.** Whether you prefer a pencil and paper or something on your iPad or 'phone, it is extremely worthwhile having the ability to make notes. That way you can scribble down the details of any conversation, and action points, rather than rely on your memory in what might be a very busy event.
- **Check the timings and details with the organisers - What time does the event start?** It is expected that I'm there for the whole two hours or can I drop in when I want? Is there a payment on the day? Do I need to bring cash? Are there any other specific details which you need to be aware of? You will feel a whole lot more relaxed if you know exactly what you are attending and all of the relevant details, rather than trying to find an Email you received a week ago at the same time as trying to park the car.

During the event

Once you're there - what now?

- **Stick to the format** - If the organisation specify a format then stick to it. You want to be remembered for the right reasons, and not for being the person who took 3 minutes in the 40 second round.
- **Don't prejudge the people in the room** - This is the biggest mistake I see people make in networking. The biggest referrals and the most lucrative opportunities often come from the least expected sources. Don't ever turn anyone down for a conversation or a One to One meeting if they offer. Don't ever think that anyone isn't worth talking to or that they wouldn't be interested in what you have to offer.
- **Say it like you mean it** - When you do your 40 seconds or your introduction, make sure you sound enthusiastic about what you do. Nobody expects you to be a perfect presenter - but you can be nervous and still passionate. Have your 40 seconds written down if you need to. You want other people to be interested in you, that interest needs to come from you first.
- **Two ears, one mouth** - Remember that age old piece of advice? You have two ears and one mouth, use them in that proportion. Whenever you are in conversation with people, don't be tempted to simply broadcast about what you do. Far better to find out about them and their business first. If you listen to what they say, you might even find out that they urgently need a service like yours!
- **Make notes** - Write down anything you need to remember. If you have offered to follow up with someone, make a note so you don't forget, particularly if you go straight into another conversation.
- **SMILE** - This one should be at the top. Nobody wants to talk to someone who looks as though their pet goldfish has just died. Remember to look as though you're enjoying being there and enjoying the conversations you're having. Who knows, you may be enjoying it, you've just forgotten to tell your face.

After the event

So much of the good work that is done in networking meetings goes to waste because people forget to follow up in between.

You may be the very best at what you do. You may offer the best value. You may be the only person who does what you do. But I don't need your service when I meet you.

As I write this in 2014 there are SO many ways to keep in touch, and most business owners don't bother. Be the one who stands out by following up and keeping in touch.



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START YOUR OWN BUSINESS

- If you have had One to One meetings with people, at the very least fire them off an Email referencing the conversation and promising to keep in touch.
- If you have specifically offered to follow up with them, make a note to do so and then do it. Don't break the first ever promise you make to them.
- DO NOT try to sell to them on your first follow up. Everyone else will. You will stand out particularly if your early contact is personal.
- Find them on LinkedIn, Google+, Facebook or Twitter and connect. That way you're getting onto their turf and connecting on their terms. Actively use social media to keep in touch with your contacts.
- Maintain a CRM (Contact Relationship Management) system that suits you and reminds you to keep in touch with your network.
- **PICK UP THE PHONE** - in 2014, as I write this, and despite the huge impact that social media has made, it is still ok to pick up the 'phone to your prospects and contacts. In fact so many people hide behind Emails that actually talking to people will help you stand out.
- Look out for opportunities for the people that you meet. The greatest networkers, the peopler who win the most business through networking, are the ones who give out the most. Everybody will welcome your call if you're the person who gives them referrals, and, when you need something in return, your network will happily return the favour.

