

How To Work A Room

Abstract: Rob Brown gave the opening presentation at the BIALL Conference and filled us all with confidence on how to network at either a social or business event. He gave lots of helpful hints on how to prepare for an event, whom to approach on entering a room and then ten practical tips on how to behave at the event to ensure successful networking.

Keywords: Skills training; networking

Introduction

Networking events can be fantastic opportunities for business building and there are three purposes for them:

- To make connections with new people
- To maintain relationships with people you already know
- To learn something from a speaker

But one thing you should not do at an event specifically designed for networking is to try to sell to people, even though your ultimate goal is to increase your business. After all, you don't get paid for networking, you get paid on the *results* of your networking!

So how do you make sure that networking does lead to new business? By "working the room". This means getting to meet as many people as possible, and making as many good connections as possible.

If you spend your precious time choosing an event, registering and travelling to it, you don't want to waste your effort, time and entrance fee by leaving it all to chance when you get there. Some people can enter a room and effortlessly begin a conversation with anyone. But if that's not you, you need to put some work into making the most of networking. And that's what this article is all about.

"It's not called 'netSIT' or 'netEAT', it's called 'netWORK', and in order to have a successful networking event, you need to 'work' the network."

Ivan Misner

Founder and CEO of Business Network International (BNI)

Experienced networkers know how to begin, maintain and end conversations well. They know how to build rapport that eventually generates new business. If you want to do that, to "work a room" to the maximum,

there are two things to consider: what to do before an event, and what to do while you're there.

Before the event

1. Choose the right event

You want to be sure that you are going somewhere where the people you meet are the right contacts for building your business. Check this thoroughly before booking. Talk to the organisers.

2. Learn some scripts

If you have some great questions already lined up, you won't be stuck for words when the conversation drags after "What's your name?" and "What do you do?" Just think about what type of people will be at the event and what might interest them, and think up a few relevant questions to have at the ready.

"The worst time to think of what to say is as the words are coming out of your mouth."

Rob Brown

Networking expert and founder of the TRIP System[®]

3. Bring your business cards

What's the point in having business cards if you forget to bring them? Nowhere are your business cards more needed than at a networking event. And it looks pretty third rate to be hunting for something to write your phone number on when someone asks for your contact details.

4. Wear clothes with pockets (or carry a handbag!)

Whether it's a jacket or a shirt with pockets, make sure you wear something that makes it easy to store and pull out your business cards. It beats getting them out of your wallet or digging into your briefcase every time you're asked.

5. Eat before you go

Not only do you not have three hands – one for your drink, one for your food and one for shaking hands at the same time – if you don't need to eat you won't be hampered by food in your mouth when you are trying to make conversation.

6. Arrive early

It's surprising what a difference arriving early can make. Getting there on time isn't enough. First of all, nine times out of ten you can't calculate exactly how long it's going to take to travel somewhere, so if you end up rushing to make it on time you'll arrive stressed. Secondly, if you do arrive late, you'll be even more stressed! This isn't the best state of mind for networking.

At the event

Now, this is where "working the room" really begins. And where knowing what you are going to do in advance can really make the time out of your busy schedule worthwhile.

Here are ten tips to bear in mind, as you enter the room:

1. Survey the room

Don't just rush into it. Take a few moments to look around the room. Grab a drink if necessary, to give you the excuse to stand back and look at what's happening.

Remind yourself why you are there, who you want to see and why, and look for anyone you may know who you really want to speak to. Then select the individuals or open groups to approach. (More on that later.)

2. Stay in control

If you can't stick to the fruit juice or water, don't overdo it on the alcohol! One drink might calm your nerves, but

more than that and your brain will begin to feel the effects. And a drunk networker is a useless networker!

3. Keep focussed

Even if you get into a very good chat and are having a great time, don't use that as an excuse not to really chase the contacts that might result in more business. You could make lots of friends, but they might be people who can't help you build your business. Don't ignore anyone, but stay targeted on those who are likely to bring you business and on your goals for the day.

4. Be positive

As someone once said, get yourself in the right state of mind, not in a right state! When you enter the room, keep your head up, shoulders back, smile and look as if networking is like falling off a log. If you're nervous – don't show it – but be assured that the majority of people in the room feel just the same as you.

5. Be interested in others

The phrase "working a room" sounds rather aggressive and self-seeking, but remember that sustainable business success is not about exploitation but about building relationships for mutual benefit. If you are pushy and launch into sales pitches before you've established a relationship, you'll soon be shunned at networking events. And if you have no conversations, you'll have no relationships, no opportunities and no business. So make sure you are more interested in helping than selling, and doing more listening than talking.

"Business is personal, and even the biggest deals, orders, projects, sales, promotions and contracts come down to two or more people making a connection."

Rob Brown

Networking expert and founder of the TRIP System[®]

6. Be patient

Building relationships through networking is a long-term game. New contacts are unlikely to spill the beans on all their needs and write you a cheque until they've got to know you, trust you and understand what you have to offer. Besides, they might not have a need right now – but

they may have in six months' time. So the aim is to get to know people, and get them to know you, so when they do have a need you are 'front of mind' and the first one they come to. That's why maintaining relationships at networking events is just as important as meeting new people.

7. Approach strangers

You can't be a wallflower. You have to be pro-active to be a networker. Don't worry, strangers expect to be approached. This is a networking event, after all!

8. Be polite

Those little words like 'please', 'thank you' and 'excuse me' make a big difference. If you are rude or inconsiderate, you won't win many friends – and people like to do business with their friends, not their enemies.

9. Know how to exit

If you're feeling trapped and bored in a conversation, guess what the other person is feeling? Don't prolong the agony for either of you. Be the first to make a move, and

exit your conversation graciously. One way to do this is by inviting them to get a drink or some food with you. In the process of moving to the drinks or food table, you may bump into other people on the way and naturally begin talking to others. Alternatively, express your apologies and say you've spotted someone you promised to speak to and you don't want to let them down. Then thank the person for talking to you, say how nice it was to meet them, and leave.

10. Use your questions

I say, "Great questions lead to great conversations, which lead to great relationships, which lead to great opportunities, which lead to great business." Having already prepared some questions, make sure you use them to develop the small talk, then gradually introduce some about their business, then their issues and, if appropriate, their current providers.

Follow all these simple guidelines for working a room, and your networking will soon be much more effective.

If you want to learn some more in-depth aspects of working a room, how to approach people, how important first impressions are and how to become a networking hub, see Rob Brown's special report on how to work a room at www.thetripsystem.com, and the Networking section of his website.