

A woman with glasses is laughing joyfully while shaking hands with a man in a suit. She is holding a folder and a business card. The background is blurred, suggesting a professional setting.

6 GREAT NETWORKING TIPS

THAT DON'T
INVOLVE WALKING INTO
A ROOM FULL OF
STRANGERS

6 great networking tips that don't involve walking into a room full of strangers

(Plus, 4 more tips for those of you who are brave enough to do so!)

'Improving networking skills' is a goal that many of my clients bring to our coaching sessions. As we begin digging into the specifics of the change they want to see, I ask them how they currently feel about networking, I get responses such as:

'Eeek, I hate networking, walking into a room full of people is scary'.

'I avoid networking if possible, I can't think of what to say when I meet new people'.

'I'm not a pushy person and I don't like selling myself, so networking isn't for me'.

'I don't have time to network'.

'I've never got a new job from networking so I've given up. I don't see the point of it.'

These statements show that many people aren't fans of networking, and some have misconceptions of its purpose. If you can give me ten minutes of your time to read my guide, I'll explain what networking is really about, how you can enjoy it and most importantly, how you can adapt it to your style and strengths. **Remember, both introverts and extroverts can build strong networks.**

If at the end, you still need some support to see networking as a friend rather than foe, get in touch and we can discuss how coaching can help.



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Tip #1: You're already a networker!

Walking into a room full of 'business suits and name badges' is only one example of networking. Think about your daily interactions with: colleagues, customers, suppliers, fellow conference delegates, neighbours, friends, friends of friends, the parents of your children's friends, your hairdresser, the vet, the people in your gym class. These interactions are all networking - you are making connections with people and you help each other out when you can.

ACTION: List who is already in your network. (You're in their networks too, which can open up routes to their contacts).



Tip #2: Networking is not Me, Me, Me

There's a common misconception that networking is about meeting people in a speed dating style, to see what they can do for you.

This is WRONG, WRONG, WRONG.

Unfortunately there are plenty of people who follow this approach (try and escape them at all costs).

Successful networkers have a genuine interest in other people and a willingness to help. On the flip side, when it's appropriate they are equally comfortable talking about themselves and asking their network for help.

ACTION: Look at the list you have just written for tip #1. Think of something you can do to help someone in your network – then do it!

Tip #3: There is no time like the present to start building your networks

Linked with Tip #2, networking shouldn't be started when you need something. It's about being interested in connecting with people first, with business coming later (or possibly not at all).

ACTION: Pick up the phone, go for a coffee, or send an email to someone in your network, with no agenda other than to see how they are doing.



Tip #4: Build your credibility and visibility

In her book 'Business Networking', Heather Townsend describes four traits of successful networkers, we'll cover each of them over the next three tips. I've grouped the first two together as I think they overlap, they are *credibility* and *visibility*.

Imagine you'd hired a firm of conveyancing solicitors when you moved apartment. They missed vital information about maintenance fees and constantly had to be chased for any work to take place. Would you recommend them to a friend or colleague? No, of course not, they haven't demonstrated credibility to you, so recommending them could damage yours.

This is all part of networking, you need to ensure you're behaving in a credible way at all times. For your credibility to have an impact you also need visibility. Interesting opportunities can't come your way if no one knows about you?

ACTION: Pick one or more of these ideas and implement them to enhance your credibility and visibility;

Contribute to professional online forums.

Mentor more junior colleagues/contacts.

Start a LinkedIn group.

Volunteer for profile raising opportunities (presentations, working groups etc.).

Write an e-book/blog/newsletter article.

Be you, be genuine.

Share testimonials/success stories (not too many or it'll sound Me, Me, Me).

Do what you say you will (e.g. if you meet someone and offer to email them some information, make sure you do).

Introduce people to other credible people, plus have credible people introduce you (some of their credibility will be reflected onto you).

Get a domain name of your name and start using it as an online CV.



Tip #5: Understand your personal brand and communicate it.

Yes I know everyone seems to be banging on about personal brand these days but that's because it matters. Thanks to the internet there are more opportunities but it also means you are now competing for them on a global scale. You need to stand out from the crowd, having a clear personal brand is key to this.

When you're clear on your personal brand, you can amplify it to others. Just make sure your personal brand is something you want to be known for. (If it isn't, or you're not sure what your brand is, get in touch to discuss how coaching can help).

ACTION: Don't know what your personal brand is? Start by asking friends, family and colleagues the words that spring to mind when they think of you. What's special about you, your style, your skills? Look at previous 360 feedback, testimonials and messages you've received when you left an organisation or team. These all hold clues to your brand.

Then when you're clear on your brand, brainstorm ways that you can amplify/promote it. This could be using it to shape how you introduce yourself in meetings or at events. If you've built a website as your online CV (See Tip #4) ensure the text and images convey your brand. E.g. if part of your brand is professionalism, don't use an image that's clearly been cropped from a party or wedding photo!

Tip #6 Pay into your social capital account

Helping people is a key, if not *the* purpose of networking. Most humans help because they want to. If you're helped, you are more likely to help that person in return, this can be termed as 'building social capital'.

You need to build your social capital but a word of caution here; don't offer to help people with the mind-set that it's an 'IOU' to call in at a future date. True networkers help with no strings attached. It's a kind of karma approach, the person you help may not be able to return the favour, but somewhere along the line someone else will.

ACTION: Pick some tips from the following list to help build your social capital. (I just consider these steps as good manners but it's amazing how many people don't apply them).

- Send thank you notes.
- When you meet someone, follow up with an email to let them know you enjoyed meeting them and give the offer of help for the future.
- Congratulate them on successes, and offer encouragement if you know things aren't going so well.
- If appropriate pass referrals/opportunities to them.
- Connect them to others in your network.
- Link to their blog, follow them on Twitter.

Okay, so I said that you can apply all of the above without ever having to attend a formal networking event, this is true but why not bite the bullet and sign up for a networking event?

The following tips will help you.

Tip #7: Be bold – go to a networking event

I attend a lot of events that involve networking. When I book onto them I'm excited and enthusiastic, yet despite this, just before I arrive at the venue I catch myself thinking '*Julie why do you put yourself through this? Run away whilst you still can!*' The crazy thing is within minutes of walking in I find someone interesting to talk with and forget about pre-event nerves!

ACTION: Attend a networking event. You can find them through your organisation, professional/membership bodies, Eventbrite.co.uk, LinkedIn or even start by practicing at sports or social clubs that you attend.



Tip #8: Act like the host - start the conversation

If starting a conversation with a stranger sounds scary, remember these two things;

- 1) most people will be in the same boat as you
- 2) people know about themselves.

This means that whatever their outward appearance, other people will probably be feeling the same as you and most will be appreciative of your efforts to get the ball rolling.

Ask them questions about themselves – it's one topic they are sure to know something about, plus we like people who take an interest in us.

Occasionally you'll get someone who gives nothing back despite all your open questions. Some people really struggle with the initial small talk. Give them a chance but if after a few minutes all their answers lead to conversational dead-ends don't feel bad about moving on. As with anyone, close things off politely by saying that it's been nice meeting them (even if you are thinking the opposite!)

Strolling up to groups of people can be daunting, so I tend to start conversations with people who are on their own. If however, everyone is talking in groups when you arrive, just try and catch the eye of someone in a group, if they are good networkers they'll bring you into the conversation.

Then, when you're in a group, involve other people who may be stood on the outskirts, introduce them to others.

If you find it tricky to start conversations face-to-face why not see if you can contact other attendees beforehand via email or phone. This way you'll already know someone when you arrive (and arranging to meet them will stop you doing a runner).

Alternatively be human and tell the organisers that you don't know anyone and ask them to introduce you to someone.

ACTION: Think of some questions to start a conversation and practice them on a stranger (or someone you don't know very well). Do it this week.

Here are a few ideas: How has their week been? What made them come to the event? What do they enjoy about what they do?

Tip #9: Have an intro that opens conversational doors

Practice your response to "So what do you do?" Find ways to bring what you do to life. Try to say something different to – "I'm a..." or "I work for..." Frame it in terms of what difference you make, who you really are and why you do what you do (think back to Tip #5 - your personal brand) This encourages people to ask you more, getting the conversation going.

ACTION: Practice your intro on someone you trust to be supportive *and* give you constructive feedback.



Tip #10: Follow up.

Before attending networking events block out some time in your diary to follow up afterwards. Otherwise you run the risk of having a bunch of interesting conversations that never turn into connections. Think back to Tips #4 and #6, remember your credibility and social capital, if you've promised to send someone information or put them in touch with someone in your network make sure you do it.

Further reading:

Business Networking, Financial Times Guides,
Heather Townsend

Still need some help?

Get in touch to find out how coaching can help you:

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