



Network Like a Professional

Go beyond exchanging business cards to building relationships

You return from a networking luncheon to an afternoon of meetings and appointments, dozens of new emails and several voicemails that require immediate attention. The many business cards you collected that day remain in your pocket until day's end, when you remember to add them to the small stack on your desk that you don't want to file away just yet.

Days pass, then a week or two. You've had the best intentions to send off a quick note or email to some of the people whose cards still sit on your

desk. Eventually it seems too late – better luck next time.

Developing a networking strategy can help you avoid the self-defeating cycle of spending your time at events with little to show for it. With a system in place, you can potentially form lasting relationships, bring in business by referral, and position yourself for career success.

But first, the experts say, you need to stop thinking about “What’s in it for me?” and focus instead on “How can I help others?”

FIND COMMON GROUND

First, understand that any networking strategy is about marketing yourself as your own unique brand, separate from that of your employer – although certainly your company can enhance your personal brand.

“A word-of-mouth marketing plan begins with identifying your networks,” said **Dr. Ivan Misner**, founder of BNI, a business referral organization with 5,000 chapters worldwide and a best-selling author.

Use Social Networking Sites Wisely

Although they're no substitute for face time, online networking sites have a valid place in establishing business connections.

Websites such as **LinkedIn**, **Plaxo**, **Ecademy**, **Spoke** and **XING** are designed for business professionals. They offer a way to highlight your resume and credentials, keep track of former colleagues, and potentially attract referrals. You make new contacts by searching for people you know or by viewing other users' networks and requesting introductions.

For the most part, using the sites is free; fee-based memberships grant greater access and other benefits.

According to reports, LinkedIn has 17 million members with 42,000 newcomers each day. Average age of users is 41; average annual salary is \$108,000. Special groups exist for those with 500 or more “connections” in their network.

“LinkedIn and Plaxo and those places are great places to get information,” said BNI's Hazel Walker. “I can throw questions out and get my network to respond back to me, which has really helped me write great articles.”

The social networking sites also serve as a search-engine magnet, potentially putting your bio or resume in front of people who are looking for more information about you online, explained

Jason Jacobsohn, a small-business adviser who writes the blog *Networking Insight* (www.networkinginsight.com).

Jacobsohn, who has more than 200 individuals in his LinkedIn network, says the site is just one more tool he uses to reach out to people, in addition to his website, blog and Facebook profile.

His advice is to use discretion when accepting “invitations” to join others' networks on LinkedIn or other sites – especially if you don't already know the other person. “To me, there's no value in that. If someone is local, I will ask him or her if we can meet first before I add that connection. That way, I have that person as a resource,” he said.

In his blog at Entrepreneur.com, Misner describes six different kinds of networking groups, including “casual contact” groups like chambers of commerce, referral organizations, service clubs, professional associations, business/social organizations and women’s organizations.

“If you pick two or three of these different kinds of groups and you become active in them, you’re out there connecting with people; you’re building relationships,” Misner said.

Your goal at events is to meet people, of course – but keep in mind that your real objective is to find individuals with whom you may want to build relationships.

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– Dr. Ivan Misner –

“First it’s about creating common ground. ‘Tell me what you do, tell me how long you’ve been in this business, tell me who your ideal client is,’ ” said **Sandra Yancey**, founder and CEO of eWomenNetwork, a membership-based women’s networking organization, and the author of *Relationship Networking: The Art of Turning Contacts into Connections*.

“Then – and this is what really great relationships are built on – it’s about showing up to say, ‘How can I help you?’ ” Yancey said.

Misner has established what he calls the VCP process of networking: visibility, credibility and profitability. “This is a chronological process,” he said. “You must first be visible in the community. Then you have to establish credibility – who you are, what you do, and that you’re good at it. That takes time to develop, and profitability comes later.”

FOCUS ON KEY CONNECTIONS

Before you head out the door, make sure you have the basics down, such as how to introduce yourself and “how to act like the host of the event, versus standing back and waiting for people to meet you,” advises **Hazel Walker**, executive director of the Central Indiana region of BNI.

Your goal with your introduction should be to make sure that people remember your first name, if not your last name, Yancey said. “I say, ‘Hello, my name is Sandra,’ and as I put my hand out, ‘Sandra Yancey.’ ”

Job titles need not be part of how you introduce yourself – instead, convey your passion, as in: “I have a company and I’m passionate about helping women connect with each other,” Yancey said of her own introduction. “What you’re passionate about is what you do, not the company you work for,” she added.

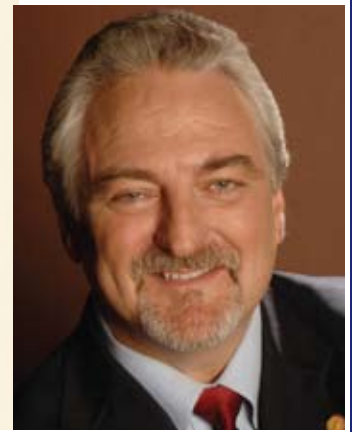
When you do meet someone with whom you connect and want to get to know better, ask for a business card and jot a note to yourself on the back. The same goes for your card – write a few words about what you discussed before handing it over.

Think quality, not quantity. Yancey said that at an event of 100 people, she usually follows up with two to four individuals. To help herself keep track, she discreetly folds the top right corner of the business card as she puts it in her pocket.

“Your future and your fortune are all in your follow-up. Everybody intends to do it, but probably fewer than 5 percent actually do,” she said.

The experts generally agree that the best way to follow up with new contacts is to send a handwritten note as soon as possible. However, “the best follow-up system is the one you will do consistently,” Misner says – and if that means emails, that is better than no follow-up.

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Dr. Ivan Misner
founder and chairman
BNI



Hazel Walker
executive director
Central Indiana region of BNI



Sandra Yancey
founder and CEO
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“I’m horrible at handwritten notes,” Misner said. “I’m a perfectionist. I’ve rewritten notes three times and that’s a waste of time.” Instead, he uses an online service, SendOutCards.com, which generates and mails notes that you type, using samples of your own handwriting.

Walker said that she tries to write two handwritten notes every day as a way to keep in touch with her contacts. “I buy very small note cards, and I don’t write a big, flowing message,” she said. “You’d be surprised at how many people’s offices I go to and my card is still sitting on their desk.”

FORM RELATIONSHIPS

The next step is to try to arrange another meeting with your key connections, if possible. If you haven’t received a response to your note, go ahead and call – but don’t get discouraged if you still don’t hear back.

Yancey sometimes attaches a \$5 gift card for a coffee shop to a second note card and writes, “Please call me before you use this card.”

“People call me back and say, ‘I can’t believe you did that; please don’t think I was trying to ignore you,’ ” she said.

When you do meet for coffee, you don’t have to get down to business right away – or even at all. “What tends to happen is that two people meet and it’s like a boxing match. You see them moving back and forth to try to find an opening to close a deal. They’re trying to make a sale,” Misner said. “A good networker has two ears and one mouth and should use them both proportionately.”

Walker teaches others how to use the GAINS profile, which stands for Goals, Accomplishments, Interests, Networks, Skills. These are the areas you want to learn about a person – not necessarily by asking directly, but by focusing your conversation on his or her interests.

Women’s relationship-building skills are an asset in networking – but there’s a caveat. “As women, we need to be careful to do a little less inspecting, a little more respecting,” Yancey said. “We need to not be so quick to size up someone. You have to remember that you’re never really speaking to just that person – you’re speaking to his or her entire network as well.”

To study how men and women approach networking differently, Misner and Walker, along with Frank De Raffe, have created a *Networking and the Sexes* survey. The results will be the focus of a new book.

Ultimately, networking is not about how many names you have in your database, Misner said. Ask yourself, if I called this person, would he or she do a favor for me? If not, having them in your database doesn’t do much good.

“It’s not what you know or who you know, it’s how well you know them that really makes a difference,” he said. *W*

Other Tips from the Pros

Make sure the type on your business card is large enough to be easily read in dim lighting and by people with less than perfect eyesight.

Keep note cards in your purse or briefcase, in your car and in your desk, with envelopes already stamped. That way, you can write quick follow-up notes in the car after an event and drop them in the mail immediately.

Develop a system for filing your contacts. You can enter them into Microsoft Outlook, your own spreadsheet or database, or use specialized software like Relate2profit or ACT! A business card scanner can save data entry time.

Identify your particular business challenges and be ready to share them. At the same time, make sure you’re asking others about theirs.

Add a personal touch to your follow-ups. Send an article that is relevant to someone you just met or a book that you’ve read that might be of interest to him or her.

Practice “sweet revenge.” When someone else gives you a resource or a referral, pass along the favor to someone else.

Quality, not quantity, will make the difference. Set a goal to meet at least one new person at each networking meeting you attend.

Become a referral resource. Keep a file of good people to refer to others. Let your clients, vendors, colleagues, friends and family know about your connections.