

NETWORKING STRATEGIES – When it does not come naturally

For the small business owner or sole proprietor, referrals-based business is a key element to sustainability and profitability. However, the means by which these referrals are generated – through networking – are often viewed with distaste or trepidation. Not all of us are social butterflies and the mere thought of attending events, meeting people, making small-talk and collecting business cards may push a business owner's networking agenda down the priority list. Realising that expanding your referral business is not about socialising will break down mental barriers associated with networking. Effective networking plans require studied, analytical approaches to the world around you. Re-define your concept of networking and open yourself to greater business growth.

There is no marketing or advertising plan better than the one you execute yourself, through yourself. This is networking. Your ability to network puts you in position to talk to prospective business partners, meet potential clients and generate leads. It gets your name out there and your services known. In turn, you learn new names and hear about new businesses. For this, you pay with time, not money.

If you feel more comfortable in your office with staff members than in the middle of a group of strangers, welcome to the club! This is not unusual. But don't let your discomfort handicap your business aspirations. If you remain behind your desk, at the factory or in the office, you are missing out on the power of networking to expose your business to not just new contacts, but new ideas and opportunities.

This article will share thoughts on how you can reach past mental barriers based on fear or discomfort to successfully network for the betterment of your business.

BE PREPARED

If you are uncomfortable in social situations, surrounded by those who, though like-minded professionals, are essentially strangers; prepare, practice and analyse. First off, set intentions for yourself. Is there anyone in particular who you plan to talk to? How many new people are

you going to meet? How many business cards do you plan to get? Will you try to initiate one conversation or more? When you set these small goals and achieve them, you feel a sense of accomplishment which carries over to your next occasion and makes the act of networking less studied and more natural.

Do your homework on the event, its hosts and the likely guests. As much as possible, make sure you have an idea of the types, if not names of attendees you are likely to meet. From this information, you can decide ahead of time whether there are particular individuals or representatives from any particular industry you want to talk to, and add this to your set goals.

Once you shake hands with that person you'd wanted to meet, it would be a shame to freeze up and comment on the weather from your position in the inside of a conference room. If making small-talk is not one of your strengths, prepare in advance for those opening conversational salvos. Have a series of questions you might ask any attendee: How did you get started? What did you find most challenging in the past year? What are your hopes for this year? These are open-ended conversation-starters and they are especially useful for the person who feels more comfortable asking questions than being asked. If you're at the stage where initiating conversation about yourself seems awkward; practice being the interviewer, not the interviewee.

KNOW YOUR VALUE

For a small business owner, the chance to hob-knob with big-wigs might cause equal parts anticipation and fear but if you stutter and stumble through meetings, you might as well had never shown up. To control those stomach butterflies at the moment of introduction, you should know two things: the first is that you have a product or service that people will *want* to know about so it would be almost criminal for you to not share the news; and the second is that you have finessed the description of you and your business to a such a state of perfection that Richard Branson could be eye-balling you and you would still deliver your business pitch without a hitch.

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Learn to be comfortable in tooting your own horn. Don't brag but be quietly confident in your ability to deliver certain things. Before the event, make a list of milestones you or your business has achieved and keep them at the ready to integrate into discussions but only when applicable. If you interrupt a conversation about climate change to mention that you've won a customer service award three years running, you're shooting yourself in the foot.