

Practical networking for managers

In this article Jonathan Passmore shares some of the inside ideas on how to build and maintain effective networks. The article is drawn from Jonathan & Briedget Granville Cleave's book 'The Facebook Manager'.

Practical networking – What (not) to wear and what (not) to say

We've said this before but it's so important that we'll say it again – first impressions really do matter. Human relationships are at the heart of all our lives; people spend a huge amount of time thinking about other people that they've just met or just heard about (in real life, as well as on the TV, radio and internet), forming and reforming opinions about those they already know. The main reason for creating impressions of other people is to understand and predict their behaviour more effectively; this in turn allows us to respond in ways which will maximise our chances of achieving our goals, whatever they happen to be.

You already know that it's important to dress the part, so we won't dwell on that point again, especially since there is plenty of good advice already available. But as well as your physical appearance, you need to think about your 'presence', and whether your natural personality type is going to help or hinder your chances of achieving your networking goals. As we discussed earlier, psychological research¹ suggests that we attend to specific pieces of information about a person when we're forming a first impression; in particular, whether you're perceived as being 'warm' or 'cold' affects whether you make a favourable or unfavourable impression. The implication of this is that you need to appear confident, warm and friendly, even if this is not your natural way of being. This is made even more important by the existence of what psychologists have called 'the primacy effect', which is that people naturally seem to pay more attention to information which is presented first (primacy) and pay less attention to the information they find out later, especially when the earlier information is negative.² So whilst we wouldn't say that it's impossible to change a bad first impression, it is likely to be an uphill battle. Far better to start as you mean to go on. It might be worth remembering that if you're going to a group networking event, there are bound to be others there who feel nervous and apprehensive too.

Ten Top Tips to help you make a good impression

1. Take the bull by the horns and be the first to start up the conversation. Simple questions, like asking someone where they've come from, or why they decided to attend this event are a good way to start connecting.
2. Whatever you do, try to avoid starting with a complaint or something negative, since, even if you're just making small-talk about the weather or the traffic, it's very easy to be labelled as a negative person. No-one likes a whinger!
3. If the networking event features a speaker, you could ask what they already know of the speaker or the topic.
4. Remembering a person's name makes them feel important, so when you're introduced to other people, make an effort to remember. One way of doing this is to

¹ Asch, S.E. (1946). Forming impressions of personality. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 41, 258-90.

² Fiske, S.T. (1980). Attention and weight on person perception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38, 889-906; Luchins, A.S. (1957). Primacy-recency in impression formation. In C. Howland (Ed.) *The Order of Presentation of Persuasion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- use their name immediately in your response 'Hi Jonathan, good to meet you too', since this helps to reinforce it.
5. Avoid sensitive subjects. Just as you would at any other social occasion, avoid topics like religion and politics.
 6. Be curious about the other people in the room. Ask open questions (starting with who, what, when, how, where).
 7. Conversations can appear very one-sided if all you do is ask questions and give nothing away about yourself. So try to link what they have said to your own stories.
 8. Prepare your 'elevator pitch' in advance (see Chapter 2 for further information), so that when you get asked what you do or why you are here, you can give a succinct and compelling response.
 9. 'Fake it till you make it' is frequently used in coaching circles to inform people of the importance of their physiology to how they feel – you can role-play being a confident networker long enough for this to become a reality. So if you're lacking confidence, stand tall, keep your shoulders back, take a few deep breaths and smile!
 10. Remember that others will be feeling pretty nervous too, even if they appear very confident.

How to build positive relationships

Psychology professor Shelley Gable and colleague's research³ suggests that the most effective way to develop and maintain good relationships is through what is called 'active constructive responding'. In other words, when the person you are talking to tells you something positive, you respond by also displaying positive emotion and by asking them to elaborate.

So, for instance, if you ask someone at a networking event or conference how they came to be here and they reply they needed to find out about e-marketing trends because they'd just been promoted to a new role in their organisation, you could use that opportunity to respond enthusiastically with something like 'congratulations, do tell me more!', thereby getting them to replay the positive event and capitalise on it. According to Professor Gable, active constructive responding conveys understanding, validation and caring, and is more important to the development of social relationships than how you respond to negative events. So, be on the look-out for opportunities to respond in an active constructive way; it will help you appear interested, and keep the conversation positive and inspiring.

Managing your time well

When there are lots of people at a networking event, plan and manage your time carefully. The danger is that you'll hook up with one or two people that you get on with very well, and talk to them all evening rather than move on and meet new people. Before you know it, the event will be over and you may have missed a good opportunity.

So if you can, get hold of a list of attendees – some networking events distribute one beforehand, some hand them out at the event, whereas others don't do it at all. If you're lucky enough to be given a list, scan it to see who you would like to meet – you may be able to tell a little bit about the person from their job title and organisation. This will give you an objective for the event, a goal to aim for, as well as a starting point for a conversation. In terms of building networking confidence and resilience, having a goal to achieve also helps to relieve your anxiety, since your attention will be diverted away from how you feel.

At the same time, don't make the mistake of dismissing everyone else who is there just because their job title or organisation seems irrelevant to you – after all their partner, colleague or neighbour may be just the person that you do need to meet.

³ Gable, S.L., Impett, E.A., Reis, H.T. & Ascher, E.R. (2004). What do you do when things go right? The intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits of sharing positive events. *Journal of personality and Social Psychology*, 87(2), 228-245.

Ten Great Networking Questions

1. How did you come to be involved in.... [industry/sector/ job]?
2. What do you like best about what you do?
3. And if you could change one thing about your role, what would it be?
4. What do you see are the main trends in....?
5. How would you describe the ideal [employee/customer/ supplier] for your organisation?
6. What advice would you give someone just starting up in.... [this business/profession/sector]?
7. What are the most important qualities you need to succeed in... [this job/ profession]?
8. Who do you know who could give me some further insight into....?
9. Who do you recommend I contact about.....?
10. Where else do you normally network?

Finishing on a high note

Don't forget that you have clear networking goals and in order to achieve them, you will need to share your objectives with other people. So you will need to ask for what you want, in a way which enables them to help you. Trying using one or more of the 'Ten Great Networking Questions' above to break the ice, find out more about the person you're talking to and to gauge whether they might be able to help you further in your professional, business or career quest.

Inevitably at some point during the networking session, you will need to end a conversation and move on. Perhaps the person you're speaking to cannot help you (and you cannot help them), or you desperately need to talk to someone else before they leave. As you should never leave someone standing on their own at a networking event, one of the best ways of moving on is to introduce them to someone else

Following up

After a face-to-face networking event, always acknowledge the people you met, either by email, or through your social network, and if you promised to send them any information, make sure you do. Your email or message needs to be brief, mention when and where you met, and if appropriate, thank them for their advice or make a suggestion to meet, or to talk on the phone. We also advise that you 'google' the people you meet as soon as possible, to find out as much information about them, what they do and who they work for.

Additionally, make sure you follow up any leads that you have been given, since the longer you leave it, the less likely it is that you will.

Maintaining a positive mindset

I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.

Thomas A. Edison

Sometimes your networking plans may not run as smoothly as you would like; perhaps you don't make any worthwhile connections at all or worse, when you do pluck up the courage to ask someone for something, you get an instant rejection. This can be hard, especially if you're new to the networking scene. Psychologist and researcher Carol Dweck⁴ suggests that people with a fixed mindset find knock-backs of this kind particularly difficult; they label themselves as failures and vow never to repeat the experience. According to Dweck, people with a growth mindset believe that they can learn how to do things differently such that next time, they're more likely to be successful. There is increasing evidence from the field of neuroscience which suggests that connections between information-carrying neurons in the brain continue to grow as we learn new things – in other words,

⁴ Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY US: Random House

the brain actually increases in density. Taxi-drivers, for example, have a denser hippocampus (the area in the brain which deals with 3D space) than do non-taxi-drivers. So, where does this leave you, the fledgling networker? Well, our advice would be to always keep rejection in perspective (for more advice on how to handle set-backs, see Chapter 6). Maybe the person you asked really cannot help you, or cannot help you at this time. Perhaps if you ask them again later or in a few weeks they might say yes. Start creating a growth mindset by thinking about whether you can do anything differently to be more effective next time – perhaps your request could be clearer, or could be made mutually beneficial.