



10 tips for better NETWORKING

By Nikki Heald, Managing Director, Corptraining

Networking is not just a social soiree – there certainly is a purpose and natural networkers really enjoy the buzz that networking can bring. However, for others, the mere thought of working a room is about as daunting as performing on stage before an audience of thousands. While we live in a high-tech world, technology can never replace the personal touch required to build lasting relationships with others. It is one business essential that cannot be outsourced!

For many young executives, networking is an important part of the way they do business, and sales are frequently attained via the relationships we have created with others. So what is networking really all about? Quite simply, networking is the *development and maintenance* of mutually beneficial relationships. It's about getting what you want and helping others get what they want too. In today's competitive climate,

networking is a fundamental tool to success – being great at what you do is no longer enough and in general terms, people do business with people they like. Exchanging a business card at an event does not constitute networking, nor is it about free food, drinks or schmoozing. While a couple of these activities are part of the process, unfortunately people's misunderstanding of the term causes them to network ineffectively. Remember, building a relationship takes time, effort, refined people skills and the ability to stay in touch.

Savvy networkers understand that the trick is to have a strong relationship in place with your contact before you require assistance, information or that all-important referral. As they say, "ask and you shall receive" and obviously, most business contacts will be happy to assist if you have previously taken the time to build the

relationship. Networking when you need something is too late so learn to maximise and develop your greatest marketing tool – you! Consider yourself a walking, talking marketing campaign, so be sure to get your personal brand just right. Great networks contribute to your success by promoting you and your business – they may even challenge you to attain new heights or goals. For those who are new or inexperienced in the recruitment industry, the power of building strategic alliances with other recruitment specialists allows you to share knowledge, information and experiences – with that comes the opportunity for referrals. When considering possible contacts think about who you know – candidates, consultants, internal or external clients. What relationship do you currently have with them? Could it be improved? Or do you just have a bunch of business cards sitting on your desk doing nothing?

In HR, there are a number of organisations that are committed to increasing the profile and professionalism of the industry such as The Recruitment and Consulting Services Association (RCSA) www.rcsa.com.au and The Information Technology Contract & Recruitment Association (ITCRA) www.itcra.com. These associations offer forums, training and information to facilitate the networking process, although it is important to select the right networking group for you. Explore the internet to discover the vast number of networking bodies available in your State. Remember, the wonderful thing about networking is that you can do it anytime or anywhere – both formally and informally. It doesn't always have to occur within a structured, appointed environment. Fortuitous results can come from those seemingly unimportant, unplanned encounters with others.

Interestingly, many people find it difficult to enter a venue full of complete strangers and strike up a conversation, however, bear in mind that everyone is there for the same reason. Politely introducing yourself, a genuine smile and mastering the art of small talk can set the conversation cycle in motion. Prior to attending, have in mind three general questions that may assist you should the conversation get stale or uncomfortable. Focus on neutral topics such as travel, books or sport and stay well away from potentially hot topics such as religion, politics or offensive jokes. Try to avoid talking too much about yourself and cramming in too much information – set the stage for future contact. If you plan to network regularly, then taking the time to develop and refine your communication technique is an important factor to reflect on. Specialised organisations can assist in you in this regard and provide you with information on how to engage others utilising both verbal and non-verbal cues.

Don't be fooled into thinking that you need to attend and be visible in every networking event in town. Learn to be selective and only concentrate on those that have the potential to develop your business skills, knowledge or relevant relationships. Before gracing these events with your presence, think about why you want to attend and who will be there. Is there a guest speaker that is of interest or are you interested in simply

meeting people within your industry? Either way, it shouldn't be a chore but something that you enjoy and look forward to.

Whilst networking has the potential to be some of your easiest work, as with

any business function, there are certain protocols and rules that must be observed. The next time you attend a networking function, keep these 10 tips in mind in order to offer the most value to others.

- 1** Master a positive first impression – you never get a second chance! Consider your personal presentation, grooming and body language. Be sure to send accurate messages regarding your level of professionalism.
- 2** Arrive early and be prepared – ensure you have sufficient, clean business cards that will support your professional message. At a networking event, these are generally exchanged following conversation or when requested.
- 3** Introductions – assume the role of business host and attempt to introduce others. Handshakes should be firm and professional and be sure to avoid the wet fish, bone-cruncher or dominant shake.
- 4** Focus on quality contacts not quantity – most people have experienced the networking shark who likes to distribute 200 business cards in 30 minutes! This person is obviously more interested in passing out and collecting cards than developing a genuine relationship. Remember, less is more.
- 5** Approach people who are alone – they will appreciate your friendly gesture and you may find this easier than disrupting a larger group.
- 6** Try to remember people's names – following introduction, try to use the other person's name 2-3 times in the conversation to etch it into your memory. Maintain a contact data that records details such as likes, dislikes and other relevant information.
- 7** Don't over-indulge in the alcohol stakes – you may want to leave an impression, however, some memories are best recalled than others!
- 8** Remember to build and maintain the relationship – after an event, follow up with a thank you within 24-48 hours. Keep it genuine, short and relevant to them. Continue to follow up regularly with newsletters, points of interest and articles that may be of interest.
- 9** Develop an exit strategy – when the going gets tough (and believe me, on occasion it will) or if you get waylaid in a long, boring conversation, have a way out that is both polite and professional. It could be as simple as "I've really enjoyed meeting you, excuse me and I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening".
- 10** Finally, networking should be enjoyable and fun – use the opportunity to meet new people and learn new things. ■



Nikki Heald
Managing Director, Corptraining

Nikki Heald is the Managing Director of Corptraining which was established to provide dynamic and modern training solutions appropriate to the business needs of today. Her programs focus on maximising professional and personal visibility through consistency in presentation, protocol and communication techniques. As a specialist in her field, Heald has published a number of articles and presented at various national conferences and events. She also is a contributing

author in the book *Views On The Way To The Top*.

In conjunction with her formal training qualifications, Heald's expertise has come from a management and training background in corporate and professional service environments.

Clients of Corptraining include professional service and finance industries, leading insurers, hospitality, prestige automotive dealerships, government departments and a diversity of small businesses.

RECRUITMENT INDUSTRY BENCHMARKING

RIB REPORT

DELIVERING BUSINESS PERFORMANCE COMPARISONS

Secure your future. For more information call Deb: +613 8598 0670