

HOW-TO

Tips for success at networking

Maximize opportunities by targeting likely prospects; give as well as get

BY TINA TRASTER

WHEN SHE left her cozy corporate job two years ago to strike out on her own as a communications specialist, Mistina Bates relied heavily on networking. The former vice president for communications at security services giant Guardsmark now has a thriving business of her own.

"I could not have gotten my firm off the ground without networking," says Ms. Bates, president of Market It Write! "It's not that you find clients at every event. It's that every event or opportunity to meet people builds a network of individuals who can help—who make referrals or may eventually become clients."

Few small businesses can prosper without networking. It gives owners the tools to compete with larger rivals—offering everything from free advice on strategy and marketing to leads on customers and vendors.

Here are some tips on becoming a better networker.

TIP 1
Get out there.

JOIN TWO OR THREE targeted groups. Think about joining a group of peers, such as Young Professionals of New York City or the Women's Leadership Exchange.

Almost every sector has its own trade group, such as the Software Industry Association. Look into joining those that are most likely to draw prospective clients. Also, don't forget about recreational outlets, like a golf or tennis club. Church organizations can provide valuable contacts, too.

Sites like Ryze.com, a free online networking group, and the social



UNTANGLED WEB: Every event offers a chance to build a network of people "who can help, who make referrals or become clients," says Mistina Bates, who started Market It Write! two years ago.

network friendster.com, allow users to exchange advice and help build relationships.

Go Big Network, a site aimed at entrepreneurs and startup companies, is a virtual arena for rounding up capital, finding experts on all kinds of businesses and posting classified ads.

Shake it up every three to five years and seek new groups.

TIP 2
Be an activist.

GETTING THE MOST out of a group—as well as the maximum return on the annual dues organizations often require—takes energy and commitment. Plan to attend meetings regularly. Join dynamic committees like membership, benefits and legislative affairs. Offer to speak at events, or help line up outside speakers. Make sure the group's membership is engaged and active.

TIP 3
Aim carefully.

DON'T TAKE A SHOTGUN approach

and simply hand a business card to everyone in the room. Narrow the focus by doing some online research beforehand, or ask mutual contacts or the event planner for leads. Target three good contacts and spend time getting to know them.

"Arrive early, talk to organizers and offer your assistance in setting up," says Olivia Fox Cabane, executive director of Spitfire Communications, a networking training company. "This will make them want to help you, which can mean being introduced to key people."

TIP 4
Make others feel like a million.

LISTENING is the most critical—and most underrated—skill in networking. Focus on how you can help a person rather than how he or she can help you.

If a contact is quoted in the press or receives an award, send a congratulatory note or e-mail. Sign up for Google's Alerts feature, which are e-mails the search engine sends when selected keywords—such as a con-

tact's name, a company or an industry—appear in the system.

TIP 5
Have patience.

EVEN IF HIGH-CALIBER contacts are in a completely different business, they can still be worth cultivating for leads and advice.

Do your part by recommending other networking events. Pass along resources, play matchmaker and refer work. Invite a new professional contact to speak at a trade event or to lecture at an educational institution. Send relevant newspaper or magazine clippings.

TIP 6
Work at it.

SET A SCHEDULE—be it daily, weekly or monthly—to stay in touch using e-mail, voice mail or hand-written notes. Combing through the contact list once a month will inspire ideas.

Keep a database with contact management software like Outlook, ACT! or Goldmine. Record where and when the contact was made. Note the person's industry, as well as possible synergies and highlights of the conversation. Monitor the relationship by including activity such as referrals, suggestions and meetings.

If possible, carry a PDA with contact data to fill any gaps due to an overworked memory.

"When business is good, people think they don't need to be out there, but they're wrong," says Nancy Ploeger, president of the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce. "Small businesses must continually network, because they don't have large staffs, advertising is expensive and they constantly need new business."

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