



What Do You Think of Networking?

Readers won't be surprised that I enjoyed a number of social events in November and December and they prompted me to think about the value of networking for business benefit, not just pleasure. We all know that networks are important to our business – as a source of both potential clients and potential suppliers, as well as the important professional network where we refer our clients for specialist advice. I would like to prompt you, in turn, to consider your approach....

Let me begin by confessing that I dislike the term “networking”. To me the implication is that I am looking to meet people for my own personal gain. I suspect that it is that mindset that is one of the barriers to successful development of networks. I should also confess that I have never claimed expertise in networking. However, I have been thinking, observing and learning in recent years.

For the purpose of this article I propose that the goal of your networking activities is to meet people for whom your future interaction may have strong potential for mutual benefit. If you accept that goal then I propose four ideas:

1. To Network or Not to Network?

Once you have accepted an invitation to an event, I think you need to make a decision. Are you attending the event primarily to have fun or primarily to meet people? I know that there are marketing gurus who claim that every event is an opportunity to add to your network. However, there are many events where your first priority may be to enjoy the experience. If I was invited to attend a wedding or a football match I would de-prioritise the networking. Any valuable introductions would be considered a serendipitous bonus. So if you have chosen to network...

2. Be Deliberate but Not Too Deliberate

I like the idea of checking attendance lists ahead of business events, if possible. It helps me attempt to put names to faces and it reminds me about people that it would be a good idea to meet or reconnect with. However, if I become too focused on the names on my list I may miss great opportunities. I think we generally underestimate the power of the 2nd degree of separation. I think we also underestimate the risk of the 2nd degree of separation. eg Think about the potential circle of influence of the person you have just brushed off in order to catch up with one of your “names”.



3. Networking May Not Be Your First Motivation

There are some business advisers who recommend that you join new groups in order to expand your circles of contacts. Again, this is good advice but be careful about your motivation. I have heard of people joining charity boards because of the names of the Board members. It seems to me that you should choose the charity on the basis of your personal values well before you consider who you might meet. I have run a sports tipping competition for many years and it helps me maintain contact with many old colleagues. I can assure you that I established the competition because I like sport, not as a means of keeping contact.

4. Be Prepared and Be Polite

There are plenty of tips readily available under this heading (eg take enough current, clean business cards) but sometimes it is as simple as remembering what your Mum told you when you started school: Remember your manners; look at people when they are talking to you; don't talk with your mouth full; and don't tell stories.

These are the best of times to selectively cultivate your broader networks – and enjoy the experience.