



Networking for Beginners

I've recently been reminded about the potential value of professional networks - and I've also recently been reminded that not everyone is necessarily comfortable with networking. If you don't feel adept at networking it may be a "personality thing", it may be that you don't think it's necessary in your role or it may be that it is really hard to get started.

Perhaps we should start by highlighting the potential benefits of expanding, or simply nurturing, your personal network:

- It may open up potential career paths or job opportunities
- It may throw up some people who can provide guidance and advice
- It may allow some informal sharing of news and common challenges
- It may provide a different perspective on a topic you think you know well
- It may identify business development contacts (eg clients or suppliers)
- It may just be good fun to socialise with like-minded people

With those benefits in mind, let's review some basic skills to apply in a networking situation. Networking takes many forms so I would like to focus on some communication tips for when you are next attending an industry or professional forum and there is an informal opportunity to make contact with other people, both familiar and unfamiliar:

- When greeting or introducing yourself be warm, friendly and genuine. (And a fluent description of you and your role might help – see my "What Do You Do" article.)
- Use names and help by introducing others (by name). A supply of business cards may help others remember you. Don't be ashamed to rely on any names tags that are provided and make sure that yours is easy to read.
- Remember the importance of listening – let others initiate the conversation if you are not confident. (And check the hints in my "Social Engagements" article.)
- Check the attendee list (if available) before the forum to see if there are any particular people (familiar or unfamiliar) that you should look out for.
- If you promise to follow up someone (or something) ensure that you honour your commitment.



If that's all a bit basic here are some frequently asked questions and my attempts at answering them:

- “Should I look for an individual to greet or should I start with an existing group?” This is tricky because the “solo” person may not be open to your introduction (eg on a mobile phone) and the group may be difficult to break into. I suggest that you think about your preferred social conversations (ie group or one-on-one) and run with that. You may also like to assess their body language and clues to “openness” before making your move. It may become evident that some people are even more uncomfortable with networking than you are.
- “How can I move on to another person or group?” This is also a little tricky because you don't want to inadvertently insult someone, or leave them “solo”, but networking usually means relating with more than one person or group. Accept that this is the way the game is played and be open about your intentions when you decide to move on. eg “Please excuse me, I promised to catch up with Bill and he's just caught my eye”. And remember that “open” is not necessarily blunt....
- “Should I look for new people to meet or stick with people I know?” The answer to this question is probably a function of your social character. These forums are a great opportunity to add to your network but meeting new people does not come naturally to everyone. Often the happy middle ground can emerge when someone that you know introduces you to one of their contacts. Perhaps you can maintain some “space” for people to join you if that is your intent, remembering that you should close the space if you don't want to be interrupted. Alternatively, think about how to set up a desirable introduction in advance with one of your existing contacts.

Networking may not come naturally to everyone but that doesn't mean that you can't enjoy some of the benefits. Tune in to what works best for you....