

The Seven Secrets of Successful Networking

Networking isn't a quick-fix business opportunity – it's a way of life.

I encountered a supreme networker at a very early age. My late uncle, whom I followed into the legal profession, was probably one of the greatest business networkers in Manchester. A senior partner at Alexander Tatham (later to become Eversheds) he was known to so many people that even today, 25 years after he died, I am still frequently asked whether I am related to Tinny (as he was known)?

He didn't build his business by attending a handful of breakfast meetings but by involving himself in business and social organisations and by creating long-term trusting relationships with so many people throughout the Manchester community. I doubt he thought of it as 'networking'. I doubt that the concept of 'networking' was actually something he thought about at the time but it has certainly become something of a buzz word for professionals in the last few years. For my uncle it was simply a natural way to increase his contacts many of whom were to instruct his firm as the years went by.

So networking isn't about enjoying a smattering of agreeable lunches and early evening wine bar sessions each month – though it may help. It's about joining a range of varied organisations and being an active participant. The idea is to build up a bond of trust with family, friends and business contacts so they direct business to you.

Here are my **Seven Secrets of Successful Networking**.....

1. **Be There.** You need to get out there and join a few organisations. I don't just mean networking groups: what about tennis clubs, golf clubs, bridge clubs, pub quiz teams, Rotary, church groups, your local Green group, your local council, the tiddlywinks league (there must be one) and charities. The list is endless. But remember, it's a long-term business strategy rather than a get-rich-quick approach.
2. **Give to Get.** Be generous in business. You only get out of any organisation what you put in. If you give free help and advice to other people they'll remember you and return the favour. Try talking to one of those naturally shy people who stand on the fringes of meetings. They might be your next great contact. Talking to strangers and making **new** contacts is crucial. You will never be rejected.
3. **Look Good.** You never get a second chance to make a first impression so dress as you would for your best customer. Rightly or wrongly we all make instant judgments about people we meet and 'experts' say that around 60 per cent of that judgment is based on how a person looks.
4. **Be Interested rather than Interesting.** People love good listeners so ask questions and find out more about the people you're meeting. You

may find you have a strong common interest that could become the basis for future business. Why? Because we all prefer to do business with those with whom we have something in common. When it's your turn, tell people **what you do rather than what you are**. Don't just say you are a lawyer. Be more specific. For example, I might say: 'I act for the victims of medical accidents' And try to explain what you do by telling succinct stories that illustrate how you help your clients. **People remember good storytellers.**

5. **Come Tooled Up.** I'm constantly amazed by business people who turn up at networking events without any business cards. Business cards are the most basic tool of networking – something contacts can put into their card file or data base when they return to the office. But remember, business cards are a tool, not a design statement. I like cards that have clear contact details and plenty of white space so that I can note down where I met the person and some points about their business. Its much easier than trying to remember later!
6. **You're Only Selling Yourself.** Many business and professional people still think that networking is all about talking non-stop about your business. It isn't. Contacts will always decide first if they buy into you. If they do, business may follow. Small talk comes before big business – but try to avoid topics like sex, religion and politics. And remember, you're not necessarily selling directly to them but **training them as a salesperson** so they'll talk to other people about you.
7. **Follow Up, Keep In Touch.** This phrase makes an interesting acronym so you won't forget it! Don't harass contacts by phone or email after a meeting. But a short email saying how good it was to meet them and suggesting a meeting – if you didn't do so at the time - can be very effective.

Good networkers never make assumptions, never exclude or reject anyone and are always respectful. It's all about making contacts and finding common ground.

About eight years ago I gave some free advice to another solicitor who had asked how he might obtain his mother-in-law's medical records. I refused to accept any payment in spite of his insistence to the contrary. He called me over a year later and told me his mother-in-law had been murdered by Harold Shipman. As a solicitor he had been asked by the other families how to persuade the Government to hold a Public Inquiry. As a conveyancer it wasn't his field but he called me. The rest, as they say, is history.!

All it's really about is simply talking to people.

Ann Alexander and Alistair Macdonald, a former award-winning BBC reporter and producer, have recently launched Alexander Macdonald LLP, a specialist consultancy and training company helping its clients

and customers to develop their businesses through better communication.

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