

Networking

The dreaded suggestion of networking can put even the most extroverted of us running for the hills. Why is that? What is the issue with networking?

It can be **so** uncomfortable walking into a room full of strangers with the primary aim of asking for cash (well, in a round-about kind of way!). If you are not the best at the (also dreaded) small talk, you can understand why this 'helpful' suggestion looks less appealing than having your fingernails pulled out!

In general, I am pretty comfortable with small talk, but early on in my self-employed career, I would shy away from all kinds of networking. What would I say? What did I have to offer? Chuck in a dose of imposter syndrome here and there, and it's easy to see why networking is perhaps the most under used of business tools.

So why do we do it? To create meaningful connections, we need to appreciate that they are key not only in life but in good business too. Networking should not be thought of as financially transactional, but about what you can learn from each other, and how you can help. And if a transaction comes directly, or indirectly, then it is an added bonus.

This is where, I believe, a change in mindset needs to come. If we view creating connections as a business tool and not as a way to 'sell', then we can see the opportunities and potential.

The **reciprocity principle** is one of the basic laws of social psychology: It says that in many social situations we pay back what we received from others. In other words, if Sarah does you a favour, you're more likely to return it to her. While it will not always be a straight in/out, it is a great way to start to build connections.

I joined a women's business group back in 2012, where I met people who are still great connections to this day. Whilst the group folded just a year later, we still celebrate each other's successes and we champion the services the others offer. None of us to date, have actually formally worked with each other but they have proven such an amazing support.

So, if I have now helped you see the business case for networking, let's move onto how to actually do it! A good way to start is before you attend an event, look out for who is in the room, and who you want to connect with. Find out more about them, rather than talk about your business. Listen and ask about them; what is going on for them, what are their current challenges and goals? From there you can work out if you are able to help them and it can flow from there. Trust is built not in the big gestures, but in the small moments.

I'm not saying you cannot talk about you, or what help you need but I would hold off until you have their trust, and they have yours. When you do, have the confidence in your message. They're there to meet you too.

Sometimes the biggest fear is around having no one to talk to! I tend to find an easier way to start is to head for the coffee table, where I usually find another ally who is looking at how to navigate the room. Know that it is ok to just join a group – even just stand beside them. Don't bulldoze over the conversation, just smile and wait for a break in their chat to say hello. Leaving a group can also feel awkward. Use your manners, thank them for talking the time to speak to you and move on.

Now that you've done it once, keep up the momentum and be the 'well kent face' (look it up if you're not familiar). It will be much easier when people come to talk to you because they will recognise you and you wont need to start all over again.

The biggest learn for me was when I shifted my thoughts from 'what can they do for me, to what can I do for them'. Building connections is so much more fun than asking for sales!

TOP TIPS

1. Check out the guest list if possible
2. Learn to ask open questions to encourage people to talk
3. Follow up - don't just collect business cards, personal follow up is the correct way to start a connection.
4. Smile lots and learn how to join and leave politely
5. Go with a colleague. A friendly face in the room can settle the most nervous networker.

Unsure as to what to say about yourself? Check out our recommended ted talk.

Life purpose TED Talk link – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVsXO9brK7M>