

Networking for Introverts

The Introverts Guide: Networking Your Way to Success

By Meghan Wier

I never thought about business “Networking” much before the last five years. However, looking back, there were points where the knowledge and advantages of good networking could have seriously advanced my career, and made me more successful in my job.

If I had only known then... But now I am a “master networker”! And I would like to share with you some of the things that I have learned. Maybe they will help you too.

My biggest problem: I am shy. Now, there are people who find this hard to believe, but until a few years ago I had a really hard time in social situations. I would get nervous, shaky, and when I did talk—I would ramble. So, I avoided those social situations at all costs! As an expert-introvert, I was able to ride a long way on my hard work, fast-learning and natural leadership abilities. **But this is not enough!**

There are millions of you out there—just like me. The kind of person that goes to the networking event, (because we know it is important), quietly gets a drink and then spends the next 45 minutes desperately seeking out a friendly face from a safe distance from the crowd. I can’t tell you how many times I left after 30 minutes having not spoken to anyone!

All of the great advice about “elevator speeches” and the best placement of a nametag are worthless in these situations.

So, recognizing the obvious benefits of networking, for your sales and for your career, here are some ideas for coming out of your shell, and reaping the great rewards of increasing your “sphere of influence”.



Find a structured group - there are literally hundreds of structured business networking groups that you can join. The best part of these groups for the introvert is that there is an agenda that is followed - you know what is expected of you and each person gets an equal amount of time to speak. BNI (www.bni.com) was the best fit for me. Once I got over the fact that I would have to stand to give my name and tell about my business (60-seconds), I settled in really well. The group meets weekly, so I am able to build rapport with the other members, and have become more and more comfortable, with myself, the format and the other members. The members refer business to each other, and to date, this is the **single-most effective means of sales for my company.**

As a side note: The skills and confidence that I gained from attending these structured meetings has made those open networking events a lot easier for me!

The One on One - There were several groups that I joined early on because I was looking to meet as many people as possible. But, essentially I just spent more time alone in a corner of a room while networking happened around me - and I was miserable! The point that was lost on

me was that is not the amount of people you meet, it is what you do with the relationships that matters.

I finally realized that I do much better one-on-one. I remember people's names, I am more relaxed, and I begin to build a relationship with the person I am talking to. Not to mention that I present myself better! Recognizing this, I took the membership book of one of my groups, and systematically went through and invited the members each out to coffee, for a one-on-one. A lot of the members agreed, I was able to meet in a quiet and focused place and really get to know the people - and they got to know me. (As a note: my biggest fear was rejection, and no one said "no". (Admittedly, there were some who never responded - but I didn't take it personally - I had too many appointments scheduled to worry about it!) The "one-on-one" alone is probably worth at least 25% of my ultimate business success!

Email is your Friend - For the consummate introvert, meeting new people, and talking in groups is one of THE most frightening things to do. Luckily, technology has given us a great gift! An email note to someone you would like to network with can be an incredible door-opener. Generally people will happily accept your invitation, or at least a dialogue. Everyone likes to feel like they are interesting and important to others. And, best of all, there is no uncomfortable silence on the other end of the phone from them if they are uninterested, or can't quite place you from an event you both attended 3 weeks ago!

Contact Management System - *So how do you remember all of those people you will meet?* I was recently asked how I manage the dozens of business cards that I can acquire at any given event - and I realized that I have a very sophisticated system! Business Cards are a great tool - but you have to know how to use that tool to make it effective. Otherwise, you are just collecting a lot of useless paper!

The first thing I do when I get a business card (or soon after) is make a note of the date and event I met the person. If we talk about something interesting to me, I will write that down too. (example: DR 10/15/04, looking for partnership w/ software co.)

Secondly, I keep a box to drop those cards into when I get home. About once a week, I go through the box and pull out the cards of the people that I would like to network with. Different needs come up at different times, and a card might stay in that box for while, so I group them by "urgent", (the people I met that I want to meet with immediately) and then with industry: accounting, banking, cable, landscaping, mortgage, phone, software, etc. I email them with a little note, for example: "It was great to chat at you at the event last week, I would love to get together sometime for coffee and see if there is a way our businesses could work together".

Then those cards get entered in my contact management database. (I learned long ago that it was just plain silly to enter every card I ever get, and to focus on the ones that made sense to contact.)

After meeting with them again, I will make a note in the database about the meeting, the date, place, etc. And, (very important) I send them an old fashioned card thanking them for their time.

If the person and I are able to find a mutually beneficial business relationship, then the card goes into the card file. It is a rather antiquated system - the old Rolodex, but it works. It keeps those cards in front of you, a reminder to stay in touch!

I have one final card management system, and that is my “book” in the book are my key contacts. These contacts are from my networking groups, and I usually have multiples cards for each contact. I use the book to help out the people I meet and my key contacts as well. You never know when you might be talking someone who mentions that they want to put an addition on the house in the spring, or they need a new computer, or that they need to send a gift basket to a client. Networking is not just about meeting new people for you; it is about creating a network of people that work together. I may be able to help a new contact by putting them in touch with someone who can help them out, or who might be interested in their product. I build good-will, establish myself as helpful and connected, and give my new contact a reason to remember me next time they hear about someone in need of a Web site!

Make it Your Job! - I take my job seriously, and I will go above and beyond, and stretch my comfort level - I consistently do this for my job, even if I wouldn't personally. So I made networking part of my job! Besides all my other responsibilities I have made it part of my job to meet with one new person, and one pre-existing contact every week. Networking is so important, that nothing bumps these meeting out of my calendar!

As an introvert, you will find every excuse not to put yourself in front of new people, unless you force yourself! Make networking your job, and once you think about it this way, you will have no excuse.

Success will come to you when you are able to leverage your new contacts and relationships. Ultimately though, you will need to make a commitment to networking to make it work. And it can be hard work, especially to get started when you aren't a social butterfly! But it can be done. Finding the best formats for you is most important - and just like riding a bike, networking gets easier the more you do it, until it is second nature!

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