

Networking Strategies That Set You Apart in a Tough Economy

By **Jessika M. Ferm**

When things get tough, people return to networking with the hope of gaining new business contacts, deals, and jobs. Unfortunately, many networkers seem to have forgotten the basic “rules” of professional networking and bring an air of desperation along. These networking strategies will help you shine during networking events and allow you to build long-lasting business relationships that you can sustain even during the most challenging of economic times.

1. Do Your Homework: Many networkers forget to do their homework and attend events simply hoping that the right person will be there or that they will bump into a new prospect by accident. If your business and success depend on effective networking, let’s “net-work” not “hope-for-the-best-work.”

Strategy: Read relevant newspapers or magazines prior to an event. The Wall Street Journal or other national newspapers offer great insight and snapshots of information. I keep The New York Times on my iPhone to get up-to-date news feeds and instant access to information. Coffee breaks can serve as great opportunities to Google or “Pipl” speakers and networking contacts for additional information. If there is a keynote speaker or presenter, ask a question about how a current event ties into the presentation. This way, you are more likely to be memorable and others may seek you out for additional conversations.

2. Identify Your Event Goal: Many networking attendees forget to set event goals. They attend networking events at random and wonder why they don’t meet good prospects.

Strategy: Set a measurable goal for the event. Before deciding to go to an event, ask yourself the following questions: What is my purpose for going? Is it to socialize? To get a new client? Meet interesting people? Make myself known in the community? What do I want to leave with? A new contact person? Five business cards? A promise for another meeting? A great example of an event goal may sound something like: “I want to meet at least three new people who may be interested

in my product/service, trade cards with five contacts and, as a result of going to this event, I want to generate one new client.”

3. Come Prepared to Work: Remember to balance “net” with “work.” Depending on the type of event (social or business), your approach needs to be appropriate. A big part of networking is the art of connecting to each others’ networks, not simply one person trying to sell her products. You are building a relationship and “testing the waters.”

Strategy: Make sure you bring enough business cards. It is often helpful to wear a suit jacket or a garment with pockets for easy handling of business cards. One tip is to keep your cards in your right hand pocket and the cards you collect from others in the left. Most events serve food so you may only have access to one hand. Keeping cards separated prevents fumbling or handing out another person’s card by mistake. If you are networking with a friend or colleague, break into two groups and reconnect sporadically throughout the event. Another tip is to walk up to groups with at least three people in them. If you approach a twosome it is often hard or uncomfortable to interrupt the conversation to introduce yourself, as they may be discussing something personal.

4. Follow up, Follow up, Follow up: Did I mention “follow up”? If you don’t follow up after a networking event you have lost a tremendous opportunity to make a second impression. Following up doesn’t mean “net-stalking.” If you have ever been to a networking event, you have probably met a few “networking stalkers.” These people are not networking. They are desperately trying to sell a product or service or make new friends and you are more likely to meet them during challenging economic times. Needless to say, you don’t want to become one of them.

Strategy: When you follow up with a person from a networking event, send a short e-mail saying something like: “It was a pleasure meeting you at the Chamber event yesterday. I especially enjoyed our conversation about how to best thrive in this economy. I hope to see you at future

Chamber events. If you are interested in talking more about how we may be able to assist each other, maybe we could meet for a coffee next week?” You can also ask to add the person to your database or newsletter to stay in touch. The key to the follow up e-mail is to make a connection point and to share your contact information.

During challenging economic times, people are looking for those who can offer assistance, ideas, and positive energy. This is a great opportunity to position yourself as someone who can help. Use these strategies to set yourself apart and begin building long-term profitable relationships.

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