

Networking as a Marketing Strategy

When talking about grass-roots marketing, my clients often ask, “How can I avoid networking burn-out?” After all, it’s not what you know, it’s who knows you. Here are some quick tips.

Avoid “drive by networking!” That’s where you are at a so-called social hour, juggling a glass and plate, mouth full (or talking to a friend), when a stranger dashes up, forces a business card in your hand, blathers a canned “30 second commercial” and dashes off to their next victim. What do you do with the business card? I usually drop it in the nearest trashcan.

Remember people buy from people they know. A catchy slogan can get people’s attention - but you (or your salesperson) actually develop the relationship and close the deal. However, the deal doesn’t happen in the first 30 seconds or (almost never) the first business meeting. I even met one client at a friend’s housewarming party.

You don’t have to be high gloss. You *do* have to be real and believe what you say. A few years ago, I’d just returned home after being stuck for days in the big NYC blizzard and was in no mood for networking. But, I’d RSVP’d, so I slapped on some mascara and dragged myself to the lunch. The next day, a fellow attendee called, “I loved what you said yesterday and I want to hire you.” I didn’t even remember what I’d said (I was focused on staying awake). I probably used some of my standards about common sense. That client has since given me several referrals.

When people ask what you do, they’re being polite. They’re not asking for your resume. You need to get their interest, not bore them. In what venue are you meeting? Within what context are they asking? Tailor your message accordingly (and keep it short). Then, ask them about their business. **Don’t be afraid to be different - say something memorable.** If they’re not going to like you, it’s better to know upfront, instead of spending months or even years chasing a deal that will never happen.

Think Quality. You could do breakfast, lunch, dinner, and cocktails every day at some networking function. Before you pay another nickel for a meal that wouldn’t pass muster in your grade school cafeteria, look at your goals for meetings. Where do your target markets’ decision makers go? What type of alliances do you need to form? Are you looking for help to develop your business? If it’s a meeting designed around referrals - will they be the right referrals to help you to build a market presence, sell more, sell better? Sure, if you’re new in town, it’s quantity first. Then, start cutting back to the ones that give you results.

Think Connections. At events, keep those business cards in your pocket until you’ve actually talked and listened to the other person. Help people even when there’s nothing in it for you. Make a friend (or at least a polite connection).

Get Involved. If all you ever do is sporadically attend an association networking meeting and throw around some business cards, chances are you won’t get much, if any, business. Serve on a committee; write newsletter articles; host a new member open house at your office. Such things help you get to know your fellow members on a personal level. And, ultimately all business is personal.

Think of the folks at your next networking event as fellow human beings (not walking dollar signs) and you’ll be far less stressed and far better connected.