

## **HOW TO BE A MASTER NETWORKER: THE GOLDEN RULES OF NETWORKING**

**An Article by Debra Taylor**

**NETWORKING your way to success sounds like a great idea, but even when executives squeeze it into busy schedules they don't make the most of what could be golden opportunities to connect.**

“Most people aren't clear on why they are networking,” says Robyn Henderson, a networking expert, speaker and author with over 20 years' experience in advising executives and business people on how to get the most out of their networking efforts.

Leo Petrik, another speaker and expert on making business connections, agrees you need a plan but also have the commitment to implement it.

“To be successful at networking you need to follow a system and be committed to learning the appropriate skills to network well. A good system and good education will always equal good networking,” he says.

Henderson's system is simple – who, what and how. “I like to approach it with three questions: Why are you going? What do you want to achieve, and how are you going to talk to at least four people you don't know?”

Once you have a plan, you can walk away from any networking event with a pocketful of business cards – and one of them could take you to your next career move.

All you need are some simple tips to make sure you aren't wasting time on bad networking habits...

### **Do your homework**

Preparation is everything, if you turn up not knowing what the event or organisation is about, you won't have much to say. “Do your research, be informed, try to understand what is important to the community you are trying to connect with,” says Henderson. If not, you will have far too many conversations about the weather.

### **Arrive early, leave late**

Rushing out of the office at noon for a midday conference or event, then leaving the minute it is finished will mean you have no chance of making any useful connections. Get there early; take time to speak with people, show you are interested by being one of the last to leave.

### **Find the decision makers**

Choose events you will get the most mileage from because they will put you in the same room as people who can influence your career or business. “It’s not quantity, its quality,” says Henderson. “Ask yourself ‘Where do the decision-makers I need go?’ and go to the same networking events.”

### **Only join if you intend to attend**

“Do not join a network unless you have been to one of their events two or three times and intend to go regularly,” Henderson says. If you attend at least two networking opportunities per month, other members will get to know you and you can begin to make solid connections. “You need to have consistency, or members will know you aren’t really engaged in their community.”

### **The science of a handshake**

A strong handshake with two or three pumps of the other person’s hand can get you off to a flying start. Fact! A recent research study by the Beckman Institute’s psychology department in America confirmed that a handshake puts a positive spin on a first approach, boosting a more favourable reaction from a stranger.

### **Know your message**

Petrick recommends knowing the message you are trying to get across to new connections before you start a conversation. “People talk too much, and the message they are trying to convey is lost.”

### **Break the ice**

If you have done your homework well, you will have something to say but that doesn’t mean walking up to a stranger and saying it is easy. “Just be friendly. If you are new to an event, ask someone how it works. Look at their name tag and ask how they have been with their company, ask them about themselves – let them do the talking,” Henderson says.

### **Use the 25 per cent rule**

While it is easy to just stick with the people you know or work with, networking with them won’t get you any further than you are already. Henderson recommends everyone work to a 25 per cent minimum rule. “Try to meet at least the quarter of the people you don’t know in a room – one of them could be a prospect, new client, your next boss or even a new friend.”

### **Be smart; leave the smartphone in your bag**

It's easy – and tempting - to focus on your iPhone/Blackberry and not on other people in the room, especially if you feel a little awkward or shy. But body language-wise it is saying you are either too busy or too disinterested for them to approach you.

### **Be the host, not the guest**

If you see someone standing alone, don't be afraid to walk up and start a conversation. "I always say that networking is about making heart to heart connections; if you are engaged, focus and interested in other people, it will work. It is all about listening and being generous," says Henderson.

### **It isn't a yes or no answer**

Ask open ended questions because they will encourage conversation rather than short 'yes' or 'no' answers. If you are genuinely interested in people, you can find how you can make connections by asking questions not just answering them. It might be that you went to the same school, are from the same area, enjoy the same sport.....you won't know unless you ask.

### **Don't let your boss foot the bill**

It is not good networking etiquette to turn up at an event or conference paid for by your company and tout yourself to prospective employers. "If you are there to further your career it is more strategic to pay your own way," Henderson advises. "If you are there on behalf of your company, then have a separate business card with your individual profile to hand out if the occasion arises."

### **Follow up**

No networking event is useful unless you make the effort to follow up, and that doesn't just mean sending invitations out on LinkedIn. "I love LinkedIn," Henderson says. "It is a great way to reconnect. But following up is about building trust and making the connection stronger." Petrik agrees: "Following up is the single most powerful strategy, and the one that is least performed well." So, instead of just a LinkedIn invitation, make the effort to send information the other person might find useful – and make sure it isn't just about you and what you have to offer!