

Connecting for the long term

What do you think of when you hear people talk about networking?

It's an excellent way to expand your business horizons, whether you are establishing new partnerships, growing your client base or moving forward in your career.

There are many different ways to network that continue to evolve as trends emerge and new tools become available. Our culture is especially plugged into various networking platforms in the virtual realm. You can now initiate contact through websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn. With one click, you can connect with professionals across the globe. It's quick, convenient and incredibly easy!

Virtual networking is important, and these tools and others can help you grow your business network. However, there is one critical shortcoming with virtual networking — the actual interaction is limited by a lack of direct, face-to-face contact.

Because of this limitation, virtual connections can't really replace the value in face-to-face engagement. Despite all the technology, it still takes that direct contact to truly move from connection to relationship. And, it's that relationship development that really heightens the work-related value that occurs and deepens.

Networking face-to-face can be stimulating and fun. But, for some it can be stressful and uncomfortable. Take me, for instance: I'm not an extrovert. Sometimes, I find networking awkward. I worry about running out of things to say. So, if you cringe when you hear the words "networking event," I'm right there with you.

However, love it or hate it, introvert or extrovert, networking is an essential part of growing your career and your business. With Farwest 2015 right around the corner, it's time to get excited about the opportunity to build valuable, work-related relationships with industry pro-



professionals face-to-face.

At Farwest, you'll be surrounded by people with similar interests and business objectives. Take advantage of that! Make it a priority to participate in the planned networking events throughout the show. Or, create your own opportunities to interact with other industry experts.

While each connection you make can be positive, you can move from those connections to relationships that provide increased value!

Let's take a look at three phases of the networking process and some tips that will prepare you for your next networking opportunity.

The introduction

Just say hello. Sometimes, it's easier said than done. Introducing yourself to a room full of strangers can be intimidating.

The great thing about networking events is that you're all there for the same reason. Approach each networking opportunity as a way to meet new friends with similar interests. If interacting in a group setting makes you uneasy, start with one person. A simple hello is completely appropriate and opens the door to new conversation.

Know what you do. Networking doesn't have to feel like a sales pitch, but it's important to be able to articulate what you do — and clearly! Some people call this the elevator pitch. That's too formal or complicated for this first phase. Instead, keep it simple and to the point

so that it creates opportunity for further interaction. "I assist organizations with" Remember, it's about the "do," not the title, at this point.

The exchange

Ask questions. This will keep the conversation going, and also help you discover similarities and common interests. The reality is, lots of people like talking about themselves when given the opportunity — so create that opportunity. If nothing else, you'll learn something!

Be a good listener. As you continue to work through a networking event, you will meet a number of people. Business cards will give you a list of names and companies, but how can you remember specifics about each person that you meet?

Listening within a conversation will help you learn more about your new connection, keep you engaged in the conversation, and give you a frame of reference after the event. It will also guide your input in the conversation, giving you insight how you may be a beneficial connection for each other. The more you learn, the broader the relationship you can develop.

Business cards are not obsolete. Just think about what you want your business card to convey — is it information about you, your title, your firm or something more? Use the business card as a springboard for offering more relevant information, or as an introductory tool. For example, explain the information the card conveys: you could say, "My card says my title is this, here's what that really means ..."

When given a card, sometimes make a note on the back that helps you recall the person — not just their business or title, but actually them.

The follow-up

You attended the event, shook ▶

a lot of hands, and came home with a briefcase full of business cards. Now what? This is where the relationship can really grow beyond just the connection.

Set a specific way to follow up.

Determine how you will follow up with and grow your new connections while you're in conversation with them. Maybe it's an email or a personal phone call. If they are located close to you, maybe it's lunch.

Setting this expectation in person will insure that they are expecting your communication following the event, and it will encourage you to complete that follow-up. Doing so in person reflects an immediate degree of value they will find complementary. This is where the connection starts moving toward working relationship.

Connect virtually. This is where virtual tools now become incredibly helpful. You've made the face-to-face

contact, so now it's time to nurture that connection. Take the time to initiate communication with the people you've met through the networking event by utilizing Facebook, LinkedIn or other applicable platforms. This allows you to take that initial connection with people then build on it, no matter where they live or their schedule.

Social media networks such as Facebook or LinkedIn allow timing to be convenient. Once you initiate follow-up contact — which demonstrates you value that initial connection — the other person can interact at a pace with which they're comfortable. Social media is a great way to learn even more about each of the connections you've made, and see any mutual connections you may have.

Networking can be intimidating, but one way to help reduce that intimidation is to see it as just one step in a longer-

term process. This helps reduce the urgency and fear of failure that can be connected with trying to meet an entire room of people in a short time.

Instead, look at the networking event as an opportunity to initiate contact, make a connection then determine which of those connections should become a greater investment.

The payoff can be a genuine, working relationship that is mutually beneficial, interesting and opens further opportunities.

Take the first step with an eye on the next steps coming! ©

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