

# Business Networking Groups: Are You Marketing or Just Socializing?

By: Dick Kuiper



It seems that everywhere I look these days, there is another business networking group popping up inviting people to join. The concept is certainly not new.

It got entrenched in our society decades ago as a staple offered by local chambers of commerce.

Business networking can be an effective low-cost marketing method for developing sales opportunities and contacts based on referrals and introductions. The modern day version of the business networking concept has manifested itself on the Internet using social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc.) as the catalyst.

We've all heard the adage, "It's not what you know; it's who you know." Effective business networking is one of the fastest tracks for expanding the "who" component of this equation. Sound too good to be true? Well, sometimes it is.

Consider the quantity vs. quality issue. You may have 1,000 networking contacts but if only a few of those are decision makers in viable companies or valuable resources you need, what have you really gained? To achieve quality over quantity, you must be cautious of how you invest your time in these venues.

Many people who attend business networking events are unemployed people looking for work. To mask this, the more creative ones will call themselves independent consultants or even label themselves as president of their own one-person sole proprietor business. This is not necessarily a bad thing. I applaud them for their drive and tenacity and a business person who is looking for employees or independent sub-contractor resources to fill in some gaps can benefit from this.

Regardless of the side of the table at which you sit – either a business person doing genuine marketing or an under-employed person looking for a job opportunity – you can benefit handsomely from participating in business networking groups. It's mostly a matter of being selective and having a precise focus.

I offer these tips to maximize the benefits you can gain from the time you invest in business networking:

- Carefully evaluate the qualitative makeup of the group. Are they just numbers on a roster or do they offer what you are seeking, or vice versa. If you keep a keen eye and have a focused conversation with 10-15 attendees, you can usually make the decision about how well this group meets your needs in a single meeting.

- Demonstrate your willingness to give before you receive. One of my beliefs that has brought me success is this: If you do more than what you're getting paid to do (or expected to do), it won't be long before you're getting paid more for everything you do.
- Have an introductory "elevator pitch" polished and ready to go. Be succinct in what you have to offer and in what you're seeking. Make sure this quick overview is impressive while keeping it credible. It should take 30-45 seconds. Then shut up and listen.
- Dare to be different. Be ready to stress what it is that makes you unique and sets you aside from the crowd. Nothing generates more interest than a person who presents themselves as a true innovator, or even as controversial yet thoughtful person.
- Demonstrate personal integrity. Be ready to stand behind everything you say. Negative comments about competitors or other businesses will come back to haunt you.
- Display a positive, confident and upbeat attitude. Having a smile on your face and in your voice makes you a more pleasant conversationalist. The more people enjoy talking to you, the more they will be interested in doing business with you.
- Maintain a social balance in your conversation. Sprinkle in non-business subjects as you converse with other networkers. Talking nothing but business can often lead to dull conversations. Liven things up by discussing current events, sports and entertainment. Before heading off to your networking events, take a spin on the Internet and check out the latest news, sports and even humor sites.
- Show a genuine interest in other peoples' needs and goals. If they see you're driving down a one-way street where your own needs are your sole reason for attending the gathering, you will miss out on many golden opportunities. Do as much or more listening than talking.
- Follow up with good prospects quickly. If you don't follow up with a good prospect within 2-3 days after the event, you have probably lost your opportunity to benefit from the contact. Rather than a short message saying "nice meeting you," offer something even it's only buying them a cup of coffee. If you have a piece of advice or a gem of wisdom you believe they can use, offer it – just make it does not come across as condescending.

Finally, keep in mind that repetition breeds success. By becoming a familiar face in the groups you frequent, you become more approachable. People to whom you have been friendly and helpful will be more prone to introduce you to others they know who may have interests similar to yours.