



Make contacts and develop business

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HOW TO WORK A ROOM

Smart Socialising for Business Success

For most of us there is no avoiding the social side of business. Beyond industry and professional dinners, there are the luncheons, cocktail parties, business-after-hours, seminars, golf days, sporting fixtures, theatre evenings and the myriad functions associated with conferences, conventions, trade shows, presentations, sales meetings and product launches. Attending them is one thing. But making the most of them is quite another and requires the ability to work a room. Ron Gibson explains.

Business-related gatherings provide an excellent opportunity to mix and mingle with clients, prospects and other contacts. It's a relaxed, friendly atmosphere conducive to building relationships and cultivating new business. If you spend the duration visiting with friends, shyly hovering on the sidelines or lingering in non-productive situations you waste time and miss valuable networking opportunities. The idea is to work the room, to circulate and be sociable, meeting new people, starting and ending conversations smoothly and establishing a rapport that ensures a productive follow-up will occur.

Call it what you want. Socialising. Mingling. Networking. Working a room can be your number one marketing strategy. It virtually costs you nothing but it can certainly bring in new business.

Take these tips on working a room at a gathering:

1. **Go prepared.** Figure out who'll be there, what your objectives are and what you're going to talk about. This planning sets you up for success. Pump the organiser for information about who will be attending. With good contacts, often you can obtain a guest list. Common sense on the ground is helpful too. Studying the name tags at the entrance and searching the seating plan (at breakfasts, lunches and dinners) enables you to target people you want to meet.

With objectives to achieve, you'll feel more purposeful and find your actions more directed. It could be that you'd like to meet anyone who works for XYZ Company. Maybe you choose to find three prospects you can follow up with after the event. Perhaps you'd like to meet the speaker and have a productive conversation or re-connect with Sam – a potential candidate for your referral alliance you met at last month's meeting. **Don't leave until you achieve your objectives.**

Do your homework on the people you plan to meet and prepare one or two questions you can ask. The more you can learn about them and their business, the better equipped you'll be to converse with them and open doors of opportunity for you and your business. Learn something about the group/organisation – its mission, its players and past events. This gives you tidbits of information you can use as ice-breakers and in conversation with other attendees.

2. **Show up early.** If the invitation says 12 noon for 12.30pm lunch, get there at 12. That first half hour is the most productive time for networking.

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3. **Wear your name tag on your right shoulder.** When you reach out to shake someone's hand, their line of vision is aimed at your name tag. This makes it easier for your new acquaintance to learn and remember your name. If you take your jacket off at the dinner table, put your name tag on your shirt. People will avoid talking to you if they can't read your name.
4. **Smile when you walk in the door.** Almost everyone watches the entrance to a room. You need to project that you're happy to be there and you want to meet people. Nobody will be thinking "I'd like to meet that grim-faced person who just came into the room".
5. **And don't stop smiling until you leave.** All too often we see people standing around looking bored. Are you approachable?
6. **If you attend a business gathering with a friend or associate, split up.** You miss opportunities to meet people when you're sitting, standing, talking with your "buddy". Being on your own makes you more approachable and allows you to focus on why you are there – to achieve your objectives.
7. **Be the first to say "hello".** Be friendly and initiate conversations with strangers. That's why you are there. Everyone in the room has at least something in common with you – they don't know many people, they're a little nervous and they're not sure what to say.
8. **Look for someone who is on their own.** They will welcome your approach and be very grateful if you break the ice and start a conversation. Simply catch their eye, give them your sincere smile, walk over, extend your hand and introduce yourself. This will prompt the other person to respond with his or her name. Then you can say "What did you think of today's speaker?" or "What company do you work for?" or "How often do you come to these meetings?" or "How's the avocado dip?" It doesn't have to be profoundly interesting; it just has to be something. The other person will respond and then you're off. You've just made a new contact.
9. **Avoid approaching two people who are deep in conversation.** When nose-to-nose, toe-to-toe, their body language says they are preoccupied and would prefer not to be interrupted. On the other hand, if it appears they're not in conversation, that their stance is open facing the crowd, or they're glancing around the room, it's a safe bet that they'd be happy to talk to someone new. Catch their eye, smile, walk up and say something pleasant like, "Hi. This is my first meeting. Are both of you members?" or "Hello. I don't think we've met before. I'm"
10. **Join groups of three or more.** Once again, read the body language. Groups of people standing shoulder-to-shoulder, obviously engrossed in conversation with each other, are sometimes difficult to break into. Find a group that looks less involved, one with a gap for you to move into, and you'll be much more likely to be welcomed. All it takes is for you to approach the group you want to join and stand on the periphery just where there is a gap to move into. If no-one acknowledges you, say nothing to begin with, just listen and tune in to the conversation. Then when the speaker is done, pick up on something he/she said and expand on it briefly or simply start by asking if you can join in. "Hi. Mind if I join you for a while?" You'll get a "yes". Now introduce yourself.

When you first break into a group, it's not the time to introduce a new topic, or worse, attempt your personal networking. Just take your cue from the conversation and where it's headed naturally.
11. **Don't intrude.** If you accidentally enter a group involved in intense, confidential conversation, excuse yourself with "I'm sorry. I didn't know you were involved in a private conversation. Excuse me." You can always join the group later when they are less involved.
12. **Be open to those who "want in".** When you see somebody on the periphery of your group, invite them to join in, introduce them around and ease them into the conversation. "We were just talking about [whatever]."

13. **Stand in high-traffic areas.** If you feel uncomfortable about entering groups and breaking into conversations, stand near the food, bar, entrance – some place where people will naturally surround you – and you will have many opportunities to start conversations. When someone makes eye contact, smiles or returns your smile, that's your cue to say hello. When you meet someone you want to spend longer than two or three minutes with, you can always move aside and continue talking.
14. **Look for common ground in getting-to-know-you conversations with new contacts.** Good networkers start conversations by asking questions – not as an interrogator but as an interested and curious listener. By asking questions, sooner or later you will discover common ground – perhaps a shared interest or experience or maybe a common acquaintance or goal. Common ground builds confidence and trust between parties.
15. **You can connect with just about everyone, if you make the effort.** Take a genuine and curious interest in the other person. As soon as they mention a personal or business issue, grab it and expand on it. Ask follow-up questions to invite the person to continue or elaborate. It helps to call a person by name and match their delivery, style, voice, emotion and body language as you talk.
16. **Never come on strong with a sales pitch at a networking event.** If you determine there's potential for a business relationship, arrange to meet as soon as possible after the event. You might say "This isn't such a good time to talk business, but your comments have given me some ideas I'd like to share with you over coffee/lunch. How's your schedule looking for the rest of the week?" or "Can we meet up sometime and see if there is anything we can do together?" or "Can I pop by your office/call you sometime and talk some business?"
17. **Be happy and positive.** Don't be complaining about anything or anyone. People want to do business with a winner not a whinger.
18. **Make a graceful exit.** When you're ready to end a conversation, wait until you've just finished talking, not immediately after the person has introduced a new topic or pauses mid-course. Using a closing statement such as "Well Sam, it's been good talking with you. Now will you excuse me. I want to say hello to some more people" or "All right John, I'm glad we met. Your thoughts about [whatever] have been a big help to me. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to mingle some more" or "Sam, excuse me for monopolising/taking up so much of your time. I'll let you talk to more of your guests." Shake hands and move on.
19. **The host is the best connected person in the room, so make friends with him/her.** It's crucial to know who the host of an event is. Greet him or her when you arrive and express your thanks for the invitation. Spend two or three minutes chatting then move on and start mingling or ask (the host) to introduce you to somebody you want to meet. Being introduced by the host will open doors for you. The foregoing also applies to anyone in the room who assisted in organising the event or any of the organisation's officials who might be present. All or these people are "centre of influence" types. They can help you. When it's time to leave, find the host, express your thanks and say goodbye.
20. **Stay until the end.** The longer you stay, the more contacts you will make. Don't leave without saying your goodbyes to all the people you met – most people don't bother to do this so you'll stand out when you do.
21. **Give and you will receive.** In the networking environment, if you can help people get what they want, they will help you get what you want. Learn about the other person's business before you talk about your own. Try to provide them with something they can use – some information, a lead or referral, an introduction to a potential client across the room. The best and most impressive question you can ask is "What would be a good referral for you?" or "What sort of company makes the best customer for your service?" or simply "What do you need?" "How can I help you?" If you can steer business to other people, they will be moved to reciprocate by steering business to you.

More tips on working a room:

- i. Shake hands firmly. A limp handshake is a sure-fire step to a weak first impression.
- ii. Hold your glass in the left hand so your right hand will be free for hand shaking.
- iii. If you forget someone's name, don't be afraid to ask him or her to repeat it. In a light and slightly apologetic tone, say "It's been one of those days. Would you please tell me your name again?"
- iv. Have fun and be funny. People like to be with people who are happy.
- v. Don't foist your business cards onto people before you get to know them. It's pushy and makes you look desperate for business.
- vi. Aim for quality rather than quantity when it comes to the conversations you have. By concentrating on just a few people at each event, you'll build better, more fruitful relationships.
- vii. Keep your goals in mind. Seek out the people you targeted prior to the event as well as any centre-of-influence types whose names come up in your conversations with people.
- viii. Show interest in everyone you meet – even if they're not a prospect. You never know whom people know.
- ix. Reciprocate. Give something back to anyone who gives you something.
- x. Follow up with your contacts within 48 hours – they will be happy to take your call. If you told someone you would send them something, get it in the mail along with a handwritten note.

Effective networking skills do **not** come naturally, but they're easily learned. To find out about my networking and working the room courses, call me, Ron Gibson, on **0413 420 538** or visit my website at www.gonetworking.com.au