

Take a different approach to networking

Many people misunderstand the purpose of a networking event. It isn't to get customers, or even leads. It certainly isn't to 'sell to the room'.

We believe the purpose of a networking event is to find out how you can help other people (and to then help them). Givers gain, as one networking organisation puts it.

A new approach

Many business people do not attend networking events. This can be for a variety of reasons:

They don't need to. They have enough clients already.

They believe it doesn't work.

They believe they can't do it.

They believe they will be embarrassed.

In truth, many people who do go to networking events go to them with the wrong approach. We know of one businesswoman who joined a networking club and attended an event each month for a year. After that, she stopped. 'How come?', we asked. 'Because I didn't get any clients'. 'How many one to ones did you have?', we asked. 'None', she said.

Frankly, this is not at all surprising. Very few people will go to an event with the intention of giving business to someone they don't know. This person needed to hold as many one to ones as time permitted. She needed other people in the group to know – and understand - what she did, so that they could identify her as a good person for their contacts to know when those contacts had specific problems she could help with.

She also needed the right people in the group to know. You go to the networking event to find the right people to have one to ones with. You hold the one to ones so these people can find out what you do.

But you also hold the one to ones so that you can find out how you can help them. Arguably that's even more important. Most people will help someone who has helped them – and help willingly given is far more effective than help which is demanded. So one criterion for assessing who the right people are to hold one to ones with is the extent to which you can help them.

People who don't need networking because they have enough clients need to be confident that this isn't a short term 'hand to mouth' situation. The term 'business development' these days is being used to mean 'sales', yet, in truth, sales can only ever be a short term tactical activity – that's its whole rationale. The development of a business can only be strategic. Strategic means of getting clients include active advocacy and referral relationships, we argue.

People who believe they can't do it, or that networking doesn't work (usually the same belief), probably need to improve their game – and maybe go to networking events which are empathetic to the ideas set out above.

People who believe they'll be embarrassed are probably right – but in the immortal words of Susan Jeffers, 'Feel the fear and do it anyway'. They won't be embarrassed the second or any later time.

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