How to... ...improve your networking skills

Successful businesses don't operate in a vacuum – they make connections. And although networking might seem like an uphill struggle – or even an unjustifiable 'jolly' – it could be the key to a brighter future for your company.

Perhaps it's the weather, or maybe just the fact that we've been around longer, but many of the ideas that seem so good in the LA sunshine – being polite to customers, saying 'lootenant' – seem much less appealing to the hard bitten businessman. That aside, however, US ideas often translate well across the world – and networking could be one such idea whose time has come.

Benefits

In essence, networking is about making connections, sharing knowledge with people whose interests are similar or whose acquaintance could bring business advantages.

The process offers the chance to further your personal, professional and career development as well as your business' growth by learning from others' experience and how they have dealt with similar challenges.

A typical network involves:

- benchmarking opportunities against competitors and similar-sized business;
- comparing and discussing areas of common interest, including legal issues and customer service;
- staff exchange and secondment with suppliers and industry experts;
- joint skills development - joining with other companies to save money on training through economies of scale;
- raising your profile by getting your name and your company known in the business community;
- expanding markets by generating new business contacts;
- sharing ideas on recruitment, training, talent management, new products and industry developments;
- socialising. Although it's primarily about business, networking is a social activity, often sparking friendships outside the workplace.

Overcoming reluctance

Despite the benefits, networking still has some negative connotations, founded on four central issues – history, culture, ethics and embarrassment:

History. To some people, networking conjures up images of shady, freemason-like 'closed groups', where entry is restricted and the only aim is forwarding members' business interests.

Culture. In the UK and many other countries, a strong tradition of modesty – or at least of concealing your arrogance – makes people uncomfortable even talking about their skills and knowledge, let alone imposing them on others.

Ethics. Many businesspeople believe strongly that they should get by on their own merit and regard networking as profiting at the expense of others.

Embarrassment. Public speaking is stressful enough, but at least the strangers in your audience don't answer back. Conversations from scratch with people you've never met can be daunting.

Some of these objections are easily overcome. The historic image of networking is based on fact, but today's system is very different. Any newcomers to modern networks will discover that the 'closed' groups have been overtaken by 'easy access' societies, offering mutual benefits to all.

However, in order to gain any of the advantages networks can bring, you have to know how to make them work.

Group dynamic

Networks are established for collective benefit and are at their most effective when all members and participants are prepared for a process of give and take. The Chartered Management Institute's (CMI) key skills spotlight advises:

"Successful networks are of mutual benefit to all individual members and are built on the foundation of reciprocal and trusting relationships, rather than transactional attitudes."

A network similar to the one the CMI envisages breaks down the basic ethical objection to the networking process – although you will be benefiting from others' experience and work, it will not be a one-way transaction. For every piece of advice you receive, you will be giving assistance to others in the group.

Approaching a network

However much you understand the networking process, there are a number of factors to consider if you want to make the most of the experience:

Your targets. Before making any move at all, set your basic parameters. Decide exactly why you are networking and whom you need to meet to fulfil your agenda.

The events. Many companies choose the wrong events, or never move beyond obvious networks such as the Chamber of Commerce. Work out where you can meet the people you want to meet and join as many groups as you can.

Research. Before you attend an event, do some background reading about the people you want to meet as well as the company they work for. In this way you can make sure they are the right person and get some ideas for what to say to them.

Introduction. Don't be afraid to say hello, introduce yourself and ask to join a group. Although it seems daunting, everyone is there for the same reason – to meet people.

Conversation. Approach everyone you meet as a person, not a sales prospect. Start with small talk, before moving on to what you can do for them and they for you. Don't be shy about your skills and abilities but be careful to make sure your proposals are of mutual benefit.

Generosity. Business is likely to result from your meetings, but the real value comes from building a relationship and that can only be done if you approach each person unselfishly. Consider what you can do for them and a relationship of trust will result, from which you both benefit.

People skills

When building a relationship of any kind, certain basic interpersonal skills are necessary. You don't need to like every single person you do business with, but mutual trust is vital and can be built from the start with a few simple steps:

- Listen to what people say and take interest in their experiences.
- Offer help and suggestions when appropriate.
- Don't talk too much – people don't need your life story when you've just met. But show interest if someone you've just met begins to tell you his or her life story.
- Know how to break away without causing offence – this is easy at networking sessions, where you are obliged to meet as many people as possible.
- Say what you mean, clearly and concisely.
- Be aware of your impact on the person you are speaking to, as well as their attention span.
- Be modest, but try not to appear too humble or shy.
- Keep your promises.

Perhaps the two most important things to remember are to keep your business cards close at hand so your new acquaintances know how to stay in touch with you, and to follow up your meetings with an e-mail, telephone call and maybe even the offer of a drink or chat.

Of course, it is hard to entirely lose the feeling of awkwardness that comes with artificial meetings with strangers, but the rewards are worth it.

Successful networking helps you make the right contacts, build closer relationships with your suppliers and other businesses in your sector, improve your company's visibility, share experiences and obtain valuable industry information.

In the modern business climate, the courage to meet people and the ability to build a relationship from a one-off meeting could be two of the most important skills you ever develop. ❑