

# Networking for success



BY JULIA NEKICH



Networking can be a powerful business-building tool when it's aligned with your business vision and has a strategy behind it. Everyone knows that industry lunches, networking functions, and client events can bring you into contact with prospects. But few realise that it can also bring you into contact with complementary businesses that can refer business to you over the long term, or provide you with resources, knowledge and contacts that can boost your business further.

As a PR agent, I've seen many of my clients network to great success. Networking is also part of my own long-term marketing plan, and has paid off enormously.

It may be easy to show up at an event, but there are ways to make networking work better for you.

- Realise it's a long-term strategy. Networking is about building relationships, which requires trust and therefore takes time. If you expect a sales lead at every event, it can lead to frustration. But spending some time building trust can often lead to something better: partnerships, affiliations and continuous referrals over the long term.
- Align your networking with your business vision. Know

your business vision and, as with every marketing activity, ensure your networking helps get you there. The relationships you build can bring you into contact with that business partner you're planning to bring on, better sales staff, or knowledge of a particular area of real estate you've wanted to educate yourself about. Have an agenda every time you attend a networking event, and don't leave without meeting it.

- Know who can refer you. Before you begin networking, write down six types of businesses that could refer business to your agency if you had a relationship with them. They could include mortgage brokers, buyers' agents, valuers, property accountants, conveyancers, and other non-competing real estate agencies (many of my referrals come from PR agencies who are too busy to take on new clients, or who don't work in my area of specialty). These are the people you need to seek out when networking.
- Go to the right events. Once you know the types of contacts you need to make, you'll know which events to attend to meet them. Get your PA to put together a calendar of events – one every fortnight or month – that you can attend.

- Arrive early. Whether it's a lunch, speaking event, speed networking event, or awards night, it's easier to begin building relationships when there are a handful of people in the room. Walking into a crowded room can be daunting, and arriving 10 minutes before a speech gives you little or no networking time at all.
- Listen, listen, listen. When you meet someone, be generous. It's tempting to talk about your business, your wins, or how frustrating the market is right now. But you'll get a lot more out of the exchange if you take the time to find out about their business and how you can help them. Listening also helps build trust. If your contact sees you're genuinely interested in their business, they will naturally want to help you too.
- Work the room. Don't stay in your seat the entire night. Give yourself a goal to speak to 10 people or collect at least five good business cards.
- Stay back later. Often this gives you the chance to speak to the speaker, the organisers, or sponsors – who are often very well connected.
- Get good database software. Without good software to store and organise your contacts,

the business cards you collect can often end up at the back of a drawer, never to be used. Buy database software that tracks appointments, provides reminders, allows you to log your contact history, and can send and track email blasts.

- Follow up your contacts. Get in touch with your contacts the next day. I use social media sites, such as LinkedIn, to follow up any new business contacts. (Any new-business leads will definitely receive a phone call.) The advantages of using social media is that it allows you to send one (personalised) message to multiple contacts, stores their contact details permanently on your page, and keeps everyone updated on your business activities without you having to contact them individually.
- Reward referrals. If you want continuous referrals, make sure you reward each referral with a gift – or a referral of your own.

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