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**Powerful Networking: Focus on building connections, not closing sales**

**By Julie Chance**

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You can find numerous references in the business literature about the importance of a company's mission. These sources emphasize that the mission is not to make a profit; that a profit is the outcome of and reward for fulfilling the mission. In the same sense, the mission of networking is not to gain business and close sales. The mission of your networking activities is to make connections, develop relationships, and help others. The outcome of these activities will ultimately be increased business. It's the reward, not the purpose. Matt Soltis, in his book Strategic Networking, says, "Although an early supporter of business networking, I became quickly disillusioned with it as a mainstay of my marketing plan. I found that something was missing from those long sessions of glad-handing and exchanging business cards. I had collected a pocketful of business cards but little else.

"While I was analyzing my needs and talents it was pointed out by my personal coach that I had a behavioral style that lent itself to chatting, while listening took a back seat. How could I learn if I would not listen?

"At the next opportunity to network, I intentionally listened, never interrupted, and found myself very interested in the other person's business. When I spoke, I asked questions, just a few, but selective so that they elicited answers about the other person's needs. I had stumbled on to the answer I was looking for. I wasn't there to find clients. I was recruiting others to look for my clients and pledging to reciprocate as I learned more about their business. I was participating in something I later described as strategic referral networking."

So how can you approach networking from a prospective that ultimately leads to increased business? First, it is important to understand that developing a network is a process, and it is about building relationships. A key objective of effective networking is to find out about others – their concerns, problems, needs, and wants. Become a problem-solver and a resource. Listen for problems you can

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help others solve, either directly or by referring them to someone else in your network.

Practice the fine art of questioning (and listening). Asking open-ended questions, and really listening to the other person's responses, is one of the most important networking skills. Some key questions or statements you can use to elicit additional information include:

What would be an example of that?  
Please expand on that. Tell me more.  
How do you do that?

Be curious. Develop a true interest in

others, what they do, and what they need.

Follow up and stay in touch. Developing a network is not about attending a bunch of meetings, having a meal, and going home. After all, the word "work" is part of "network." Remember, developing a network is a process. Ivan Misner, founder of BNI, describes networking as a process of developing visibility and credibility. Only then will your activities lead to profitability. It may take as many as five to 15 contacts with an individual over a period of weeks, months, or even years to develop the kind of visibility and credibility that leads to profitability.

Look for ways you can support your network members. It's not always about doing business with or even referring business to them. Some ways for you to support your network members include:

- \* Posting their information on your website or in your newsletter
- \* Inviting them to speak at an organization in which you are involved
- \* Doing joint promotional projects with them
- \* Distributing their information
- \* Nominating them for recognition and awards
- \* Inviting them to attend events with you
- \* Arrive early, stay late, and get involved.

Take a leadership role in the organizations you are involved in. It's a great way of becoming more visible and developing greater credibility with a larger number of people in a shorter amount of time.

Focus on giving, not getting. If you look for ways to assist others, you will be rewarded for your efforts both directly and indirectly in unexpected ways.

Don't keep score. "Successful networking is never about simply getting what you want. It's about getting what you want and making sure that people who are important to you get what they want, too," said Keith Ferrazzi during a January 2003 interview for Inc. magazine. Or as Sandra Yancey, founder and CEO of eWomenNetwork quotes her mother as saying, "Give without remembering and take without forgetting." In addition to the ultimate reward of

increased business, effectively developing your network will bring you:

- \* Different perspectives
- \* Information
- \* A support team
- \* Connections
- \* Strategic alliances
- \* Access to resources
- \* Advice and Ideas
- \* More potential solutions

In his book, Soltis points out another value of networking: the ability to bring your clients value-added relationships through referring them to the right individuals to help them solve all of their personal and business dilemmas – whether it is a tax question, temporary housing, or a place to board an exotic pet.

As you determine the role that networking plays in your business-building strategies, ask yourself these questions:

How can I assist the members of my network?

What are their needs?

What resources can I bring to them?

What connections can I help them make?

What can you expect if you put in the time and effort required to develop an effective network?

To paraphrase Yancey, from her CD, *Increase Your Net Worth by Developing Your Network*: A strong network brings the power to make things happen and provides a safety net when things aren't going so well.

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## **Networking: Beyond the Elevator Speech**

**By Mark Dembo**

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"Networking" has become one the sales bywords in recent years. Many will tell you that the key to building your sales is to "network" effectively. There is no question that building a strong network can be incredibly helpful to your sales efforts. Nevertheless, many people in sales face the same difficulties in networking that they face in cold-calling. It sounds great, yet for some reason they just don't seem to be able to do it effectively. Let's look at some of the factors and see if we can debunk some of this.

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Exactly what is "networking?" The first thing comes to mind for many salespeople is that networking about finding customers without having to make cold calls! A common perception is that networking means going to a lot of events, meeting as many people as you can (also called "working the room"), handing out your business cards to "qualified" prospects, and then waiting for them to call you. Once you've met all these qualified people at an event, the thinking goes, you can call them up the following day or week to instantly secure an appointment to do business with them. When this doesn't happen, our erstwhile networker gets discouraged, concluding that she is just not a good networker, and that the people she needs to sell to just aren't going to the same "networking" events she is.

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, a network is a "fabric or structure of cords or wires that cross at regular intervals and are knotted or secure at the crossings." If we rewrite that definition a bit for sales purposes, we could say that a network is a "structure of people and contacts that cross at regular intervals and are secure at the crossings."

Notice that this definition does not say anything about handing out business cards, giving elevator speeches, or closing business. Does that mean that networking is a waste of time or that you shouldn't be doing these things?

Not at all. However, to reap the rewards, you do need to rethink your approach and expectations from your networking efforts. Building an effective network means making an ongoing investment in other people, without an expectation of anything in return.

"What", you say? "That's blasphemy! How can I spend time networking without getting anything in return?"

No - that's not what I said. I said not to EXPECT anything in return. Your only goal for networking should be having other people view you as a valuable resource and as a part of THEIR network. Wow - when you start thinking of it this way, you can begin to see and reap the benefits of a strong network. Networks take time to build and nurture. In addition, just as in a direct selling situation, the most effective networkers focus on what they can do for the people they meet without focusing on what the other person can do for them. Over time, you build credibility as someone who truly cares about other people, is trustworthy, reliable, and a good person to know. That's when the benefits begin to come back to you.

The real power in networking comes from understanding a simple fact; everyone you know and each

person you meet knows on average 250 people. Your goal in networking should not be to get the people you meet to become your customers - it should be to become a part of THEIR network, and for them to become a part of yours. Every contact you make puts you at the reach of potentially another 250 people. Think of it as weaving an intricate web with many crossings. Every positive impression you make strengthens that web. As author Bob Burg puts it: "the true strength really comes though when we realize that all the people in our network are also parts of other people's networks that we ourselves don't personally know. And that, indirectly, makes each of those people part of our network too."

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So, how do you get started?

Here are some tips:

- Don't approach networking with the expectation of immediate gratification; your goal is to meet people and to understand as much about them as you can.
- Don't give people you meet for the first time a "sales pitch."
- Don't get discouraged if you don't see things happen right away; true networks take time to build.
- Do ask questions about the other person.
- Do ask if you can stay in touch.
- Do send a follow-up note, and touch on a few things you discussed.
- Do take active steps on a regular basis to strengthen your network by both staying in touch with people you've connected with, and by finding ways to connect with new people.
- Do use networking as one of many tools in your arsenal for effective prospecting.
- Do actively find ways to make connections between members of your network - remember making more and more connections is what it's all about.
- Do offer to do things for others in your network, even if there's no immediate promise of reward or reciprocation.

Start changing the way you think about networking and before long you will start to see the positive impact it can have.

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years of sales, sales management, and business development experience, focused on improving the performance of individuals and organizations. Lexien Management Consultants provides sales training, consulting, and coaching services to organizations and individuals who are motivated to grow their businesses. Each month, Lexien publishes the Sales Success Newsletter. Lexien Management Consultants is an affiliate of DEI Management Group. You can contact Mark at 914-682-2069, or at



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