

## Special Report – Strategic Networking

*By Kim McGuinness, Managing Director, Network Central*

What is a networking strategy? Why do you need one? Is networking really that important? Consider these two scenarios:

*Sally has just started her own business. She is convinced that she is too busy to network. She spends her time working in the business, not on the business – an age-old problem – and networking gets pushed to the bottom of her 'to do' list.*

*She finally makes time to go along to the local Chamber of Commerce function – just to show her face. She arrives late and flustered, in time to hear the speaker being introduced, and sits at the back of the room. After the event, aware that she only has a limited amount of time to network, she races around introducing herself to as many people as possible. The next day she spends a demoralising session cold-calling potential clients; and she never again hears from any of the people she met the previous evening.*

*Olivia manages a department within a large company and is well aware that networking has been critical to her success. She has been attending two networking events regularly and knows the hosts of each quite well. She chose her networking groups carefully, researching the events and the calibre of people who attend them.*

*One morning she arrived at a breakfast event early and met Jenny, a 'first-timer', over coffee as guests were registering. The two women spent quality time getting to know each other: Olivia learnt that Jenny had recently started her own executive coaching company and although she had no use for a coach (her company offers a coaching and mentoring program) she listened with great interest to Jenny's story and took Jenny under her wing for the duration of the event. Olivia introduced herself and Jenny to the guests at her table and initiated a discussion on a news article she had read the previous day.*

*At the end of the event, the host introduced another person, Karen, to Olivia. Karen had been attending for a while and the host had just learnt that Karen was in a complementary industry to Olivia and thought the two should meet. Olivia, Karen and Jenny had a great chat over coffee in a nearby café after the breakfast and agreed to meet up again at the next month's event.*

*The following day, Olivia received a call from Jenny to thank her for making the event so comfortable and enjoyable. Jenny mentioned that she had been speaking to a number of people about the great time she had at the breakfast and that many of them were interested in coming along to the next one. Olivia told Jenny that while she was speaking to her husband about the new friend she met at the breakfast, she discovered that his company is looking for a coach to head up a training program and asked whether Jenny would be interested in pitching for the business.*

*The following month, Olivia, Karen and Jenny met at the breakfast along with Jenny's four new guests. Over time, Karen and Olivia became alliance partners and grew each other's businesses substantially. Jenny became an advocate for Olivia's business and referred numerous potential clients. Jenny, Karen and Olivia continue to meet many new people at the breakfast events; business referrals bounce around between the three women and their contacts – and their contact's contacts – on a regular basis. Olivia has not had the need to cold call a client in months.*

Which scenario would you prefer?

So what is a networking strategy and why do you need one? Why do you need to actively network – surely the people you meet in your daily dealings are enough? For some that may be the case...but have you ever heard about someone coming across a brilliant job or business opportunity through some obscure connection? Have you ever bumped into someone you haven't had contact with for years, only to find that there is incredible synergy between the two of you at that point in time? It does happen – and networking is a valuable investment in making sure that you are in the right place at the right time to make these connections, rather than just hoping that the people in your every day will be enough. Use the following tips to assist you in creating your own strategy:

- *Be clear on your reasons for networking* and determine what your goals are, then write them down. Re-visit these goals before you attend each networking event
- *Don't go to events with the sole intention of making a sale or getting your business card into as many people's hands as possible.* Everyone is, or knows, a potential client or valuable contact – just go along to meet people and learn something.
- *Clarify what business you are in and come up with a short, simple way of explaining this.* Try to phrase your short statement in terms of what benefit you deliver – rather than just what you do
- *Maintain a good diary system* (for scheduling time to attend events), remembering to schedule the time required to travel to and from the event as well as for follow-up phone calls, coffee meetings and so on. After each event diarise follow-up calls, reminders and advance notes about who to catch up with at the next event.
- *Create systems for tracking contacts* from each network and event (to keep in touch and help build relationships). Only stay in touch with those who you genuinely like!
- If you struggle with what to say when meeting people, ask them what brought them to the event and go from there. The people you meet are just people too! You could read the newspapers and a few business magazines to *develop a resource of conversation topics*, but steer clear of religion, politics and other potentially controversial subjects.
- *Choose networks that fit with your interests and area of business and some others that cover a broader reach.* You can learn a lot from looking outside your industry.
- If you have limited time it is preferable to *attend one or two networks regularly*, rather than try to spread yourself over a number of networks irregularly.
- *Maximise your involvement within each network* - Offer to become involved in the network through volunteering for committees, submitting articles for newsletters and websites, assisting on the registration desk or offering door prizes at events.
- *Arrive at events early* and take the time to meet other 'early birds'.
- *SMILE!!* Look approachable; no one will come near you if you have your head buried in the newspaper or look like you just swallowed the taxi driver for breakfast!
- *Don't be afraid to say hello*, chances are the person you meet is just as nervous as you.
- At sit-down events, try to sit with people you haven't met before. *Try to get the whole table involved in a discussion*

- *Aim to make one or two great contacts at each event*, anything more than that is a bonus. Networking is like making friends – relax and enjoy meeting new people, the business will flow later. As Stephen Covey says “Seek first to understand and then to be understood”
- *Look beyond their business and focus on the person*. Remember that networking is about people not just business – business may follow but the important thing is the amazing person you may be about to uncover.
- *Ask for business cards ONLY if you really want to stay in contact*, this is not a competition to see who can get the most business cards!
- Listen, listen and then listen some more! *Treat everyone you meet with respect and integrity*. Focus on that person completely, not who else is in the room.
- Circulate with respect. *Be aware of body language and join conversations politely*.
- *Get to know the host*.
- *Know when to back off with integrity*. Follow your instinct. There are many ways to politely excuse yourself without being rude.
- *Follow up and deliver what you promise – always*.
- *Refer your contacts freely and confidently* without expectation of anything in return. Also be honest with the person you are referring your contact to if you haven't worked with them before. Just introduce them and the rest is up to them.
- Bring people with you – *invite new contacts from other sources as a guest to your network's events*. If they enjoy the event they will always remember you and may even invite other colleagues who they will introduce to you.

Networking is essential for personal growth, business contacts and referrals – not to mention sanity in an increasingly busy world. Treat networking as an essential part of your career strategy and not just something you do on the side, if you have time. Choose a couple of networks and, for the greatest benefits, get involved as much as you can. Attend events armed with your success tools and a big smile! Don't keep score of referrals and keep an open mind about everyone you meet. You never know who they know! Finally, follow your instincts and if someone doesn't feel right just move on without needing to discuss your reasons with anyone else. Remember, what goes around comes around.

Good luck and happy networking!

Kim McGuinness is managing director of Network Central and co-author of *Network or Perish – learn the secrets of master networkers* and is featured in *Secrets of Inspiring Women Exposed!*. Network Central runs many events such as the Businesswomen's Breakfast Series in Sydney and Melbourne. For more information go to [www.networkcentral.com.au](http://www.networkcentral.com.au) or call 1300 667 075.