

It's NOT All about You: Networking Done Right - By Bill Caraway, Hamister Hospitality, LLC
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When I hear the term 'networking event', I imagine swarms of salespeople buzzing about the superiority of their products and businesses. They ask when I will be available to meet and--you guessed it--buy something.

I have an overwhelming urge to run to the door at top speed and never return, but I know that's not an option: I am supposed to be 'networking' with these people. Locating potential customers and developing relationships with referral sources is part of every salesperson's job. It's one of the most effective ways to increase long-term revenue.

So how do I survive networking events and accomplish my goals? I believe that the key to successful networking is to focus primarily on what you can give, not on what you can get. A willingness to assist and serve will make us more personable and sought-after. Worthy contacts will almost certainly reciprocate as soon as an opportunity arises.

The following tips will help you stand out from the crowd:

œ If you're nervous about attending networking events alone, take a friend. You'll inevitably become more confident about going alone after you have attended a few events.

œ Always get people to talk about themselves and their company before you discuss yours. Get their business card first, before you present your own. Ask how their company helps people and find out what kind of referrals they are looking for. Inquire about the company website; this will help you learn more about organizations and individuals at a later time.

œ After the initial meeting, research the potential of your new acquaintances and make sure that both the individuals and their companies are ethical. Inquire at your local Chamber of Commerce or ask other reputable members of the business community. Referring an unethical person will drastically reduce your credibility.

œ Try to arrange a second appointment over a meal or at a location outside your respective work environments. Lunch is the standard favorite, but you could also try inviting prospects to a sports game or a new networking event. I find that breakfast meetings can be especially productive. Many decision makers and people in authority don't have time for networking over a lunch; personal responsibilities usually exclude evening meetings. It's easier to get managers and executives to meet you early in the morning-even if it's just for a cup of coffee-than it is later in the day.

œ At the second appointment, if you still believe that the relationship will be mutually beneficial, offer to assist the your contacts in attaining new business. Don't worry-they will eventually reciprocate. I often get inquiries about banquet receptions, something our hotels cannot accommodate. I refer those inquiries to my banquet facility partners, who have in turn sent many new customers to our hotels.

œ Ask if you can spend some time at their business to learn how their product is used. In the hotel industry, travel agencies are still a valuable asset. When I take the time to see how travel agencies use our products on their reservation systems, our hotels are able to see what information the agency needs for them to better sell our products. Spending time with the agency representative also helps to build rapport and increases the confidence an agent has in the service of the hotel.

œ Find out if you have a contact that your new acquaintance would like to meet. If so, make arrangements (with the permission of both parties) for everyone to meet at a neutral site or at your office.

œ Join a networking group. As long as attendance of the first few meetings is free, you have nothing to lose. Join if you see that you will be able to help and be helped by other members.

œ Start a networking group of your own. You may find that it is best to limit membership to people who share your values and outlook. I founded a networking group two years ago with five other individuals in different business sectors, all of whom are leaders in their respective fields. From the beginning, we decided that we would each focus on what we could give, not on what we could get. Remember John F. Kennedy's 'Ask Not' speech? The motto of our group is, 'Ask not what your networking group can do for you, but what you can do for other members of your networking group.' This philosophy has served us well and we have all benefited financially from membership in the group.

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