

7 Steps to Sharper Networking

---Renea Myers, president of Renea Myers Marketing

Networking isn't as easy as just showing up to an event and handing out business cards. Networking is an art. Here are seven ideas to get you started on a master plan.

1. Wait for the right window of opportunity to share your information.

Show an interest in others first and then when the focus turns to you, share your business card and business goals. When someone walks in handing out business cards indiscriminately, it's tantamount to "network spamming."

2. Networking is about looking for opportunities to give.

Anyone is capable of great networking through good listening and caring about others' success. Furthermore, everyone has a wealth of resources to offer. If your first goal is to be a valuable resource to others, the networking karma will be returned many times over.

3. Become adept at gathering information.

After you have built relationships with your contacts, it's time to share your business needs. Be as specific as possible when asking for leads, referrals or information. Specific requests glean the best results. It's also helpful to provide examples of how you have helped a client. Always acknowledge any kind of help you receive and ask how you can return the favor.

4. Find your comfort zone.

If you're uncomfortable in a new group situation, it's helpful to have a job. Volunteer to work registration or serve as a greeter. You will meet the attendees, but you'll also be positioning yourself as one of the "inner circle." You can also mitigate the fear of rejection by getting into the habit of talking about your business goals in a conversational manner, avoiding "yes or no" questions. You can also ask for "advice" instead of business leads. People like to be asked for their opinion.

5. Identify your sphere of influence.

Make a list of people you know who are considered "connectors" to your customers, prospects, or industry. Identify which ones are in your sphere of influence. These are people who consider you visible, credible, resourceful and knowledgeable. Look for opportunities to build relationships with connectors and grow that sphere.

6. Strategic organizational involvement.

Consider getting involved in select organizations such as your industry group or your best customer's trade association. Be willing to take on a leadership role, but if you're not willing to commit the necessary time, don't add your name to the list. Additionally, finding creative ways to contribute will differentiate you within the organization. Remember, having your picture taken is a good thing, so don't get shy!

7. Develop some stealth marketing strategies.

- Be willing to give away something to build visibility
- Attend industry trade shows to evaluate the competition
- Teach a class
- Write an article or a column
- "Own" a restaurant or coffee shop. If the owners/servers know you, they will readily honor special requests and your guests will feel more comfortable
- Prepare for networking events as if it were a sales call