

Networking ~ can it work for you?

By Kate Atkin of Aspire 2



"Ah, you're the lady who takes her clothes off" isn't the way I expect to be described – but after speaking on the art of networking I discovered this is one way I have been remembered.

Perhaps I should clarify that it was only my jacket, belt and shoes I took off, oh and yes, there was a purpose to the mini-striptease. What you wear is important. We make judgements based on how people look – oh yes you do. Are they competent at their job? Can you believe what they are saying? Do you want to do business with them? All from a quick first impression. Both standing out and blending in have their benefits, it all depends on the impact you want to make.

The mere mention of the word networking strikes fear into the heart of many an eloquent person, because sadly the word has become synonymous with selling, yet that really isn't the case. There is a serious side to networking, which, yes, can generate sales, and even result in completely new businesses. These serendipitous meetings, as I heard them described by Hermann Hauser CBE recently, have spawned many a Cambridge company.

In today's economic climate networking is more important than ever. The relationships you have with your customers, suppliers, banks and venture capitalists have a direct impact on your business. These relationships are deepened through personal contact. Don't rely on technology to do this for you. E-newsletters, emails, Linked In, Facebook and other online networks are all well and good, and have their uses, but nothing replaces that personal touch when strengthening relationships.

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A chance conversation over coffee, or on the train, can take you forward leaps and bounds. The Cambridge Phenomenon is a community of common purpose and enterprise. A physicist has a beer with someone working in inkjet printing and a breakthrough is discovered, forming one of Cambridge's growing success stories Plastic Logic. Okay, it probably wasn't quite that simple, but the theory stands up – get out and meet people outside your normal area of expertise. You never know what it might lead to.

Finding the motivation and the confidence to go to an event can sometimes be a struggle. There may be no obvious reason for you to "get out there", wherever "there" is. Some people are great when they are in a conversation at getting to know people and developing a relationship, but it's that all-important breaking the ice that can send even the bravest cold. Take an attitude of "what can I do for you", rather than "what can I get from you" to engender a relationship-building approach rather

met too many like you already" . . . and she left, leaving my companions and me completely stunned, and a little amused, by her rudeness. Take time to meet others, you never know where it might lead – she missed out on making some real connections, and possibly some business.

Networking isn't just for those in sales and purchasing everyone is an ambassador for the business, from the post room to the CEO. Seeking out the right employees winning investment funds, gaining customers and doing supplier deals as well as finding product breakthroughs all benefit from who you know. Attending industry exhibitions, conferences and trade fairs as well as local networking opportunities provided by Cambridge Network, the Chamber of Commerce, EEDA and many other groups, will help build your confidence, raise your profile . . . and increase your network.

Open Innovation, a phrase mentioned to me by one of Cambridge's great connectors, Alan Barrell, involves

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than hard sell; think positively, breathe, smile and say "Hello, may I join you?"

I have to say that it doesn't always go as expected, but you learn from experience. One embarrassing moment I had was at a conference in the States where Zig Ziglar (one of the world's greatest motivational speakers) was also on the attendee list. I really wanted to meet him and was so excited at the thought, all week I kept my eyes open for him, but to no avail. On the Sunday he was taking a morning service so I got up early, sat in the third row (well, I didn't want to look too keen) and in my mind I kept running my "I want to meet Zig" goal. When I finally got the chance to say hello I froze – I hadn't thought what to say after hello, and so I sat down again red faced, feeling rather small. Knowing why you want to meet someone and knowing what you will say to him or her when you do is a really good start.

I was once introduced to someone at a large gathering in Cambridge who was seated at a table with a group of other men. They kindly pulled up a chair for me (oh, how I wish they hadn't) and I squeezed into the small gap. After the introduction was made, my introducer went to talk to someone else and I was left next to someone I struggled to find something in common with – so drawing on my own training I covered some general topics. This worked well, but sitting down definitely left me stuck, it's much harder to leave a group when seated. Mental note to self: don't sit down at a networking event, unless you want to stay there. By the way, the topics ranged from the media to the local community, family to hobbies as well as the usual "what do you do?" work-style questions.

Which leads me nicely to another experience. Another event, London this time, I was in conversation with two gentlemen, when a lady literally popped up into our group announced her name and asked me what I did. After she received the reply, her response was "Oh, I've

businesses networking. Facilities within larger businesses are opened up to smaller companies, creating a sharing culture; and maybe, as a result of this networking, the discovery of solutions. Network Nodes are another new development, helping form "soft landings" for businesses wishing to take their ideas and technology overseas. "Networking is like exploring", Alan says, "you never know what or who you might discover. You need a willingness to go forth and the multiply might just happen."

So look for your own serendipitous meetings, focus the positive, ignore the recession doom-mongers and out there. Take time to connect with those you meet. After all, isn't that what networking is really about – forming connections with people, which can lead to lasting relationships?

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