



Network Your Way to Success

By:

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Each week there are several networking events and meetings listed in the newspaper. Recently I heard the following comment at such an event.

“Well, you know, I just come to these meetings not really knowing what I’m doing, but realizing I should be here.”

From my observations, that remark reflects the attitude of a lot of businesspeople. Professionals in every industry know the importance of networking but many seem perplexed about how to go about it. Why is that?

I asked some businesspeople what they found difficult about networking at a Greater Severna Park Chamber of Commerce Welcome Breakfast in May. Two people who have been in business for several years recalled their feelings when they first started.

“I remember wondering, ‘what am I doing here?’” Vivian House, an independent distributor for Shaklee, said. “The confidence level of other people seemed so high that I was afraid to open my mouth.”

Carolyn Melton, owner of MARCOM Marketing & Communications, agreed with Vivian.

“There is a sea of faces and you can get stage fright,” she said. “It’s particularly hard when you start a business since you are the company and don’t have all the training a larger business might provide.”

Both referenced one of the most uncomfortable situations people in general face – going into a room where you don’t know anyone and having to start a conversation.

“It can be intimidating,” Vivian reflected.

Then there is the dilemma of what to say after the introductions. “I basically don’t know how to continue a conversation after we say hello,” one businessperson told me.

That resonated with me as the crux of the problem – how to effectively respond to the, “Hi, how are you?” and the “What’s new?” questions so that you don’t lapse into meaningless chatter.

Anne Baber and Lynne Waymon, co-founders of Contacts Count, a nationwide training company that helps people develop business networking skills, contend that these everyday rituals of meeting people actually stand in the way of building good relationships. Baber and Waymon have written several books about networking know-how, one being, “Make Your Contacts Count.”

They break down the networking experience and examine what really goes on. I had the opportunity to speak with both Anne Baber and Lynne Waymon during a networking skills workshop and asked them about the concerns businesspeople raised, particularly how to make the relationship mutually beneficial as well as initiate a conversation. It all starts with what Baber and Waymon call the “Name Exchange.”

“People don’t think it through – what really happens in the four-six seconds we spend on exchanging names,” Lynne Waymon said. “They can’t wait to get on to the ‘good stuff’ not realizing that names are the good stuff. Unless you learn someone’s name and teach that person yours, you can’t really expect to begin a relationship.”

Following the name exchange, people typically slip into “non-conversations,” according to Baber and Waymon.

“How are you?” “Not bad. How are you?” “Not bad. What’s new?” “Not much. What’s new with you?”

These common rituals are actually conversation stoppers.

“Networkers need to reexamine rituals and make them fresh,” Anne Baber said. “Without a planned topic or topics that you want to talk about, you’ll waste your time in purposeless chit-chat.”

The “what do you do?” question also stumps people. Ms. Baber gave an example of a typical answer and response.

“What do you do?” “I’m a CPA.” “That’s nice,” most people respond. With that, the dialogue stops.

“Networkers tend to give their titles or occupation which doesn’t lead to conversation or establish expertise,” she said.

These rituals and not understanding what you have to give or what you’d like to get from a networking encounter prevent people from developing good relationships that are mutually worthwhile. Baber and Waymon said it takes six to eight meetings to establish the necessary trust.

That is where the frustration comes in for people who think networking is a one time event and walk away discouraged when nothing happens immediately.

“The biggest mistake organizations and individuals make in their networking strategy is that, in a burst of networking energy, they join groups and spend a lot of money and then fail to go and be visible,” Ms. Waymon said. “They fail to do anything strategic that will make them the natural and only choice.”

Carolyn Melton agreed that it is important to attend the groups you join. “For people who initially feel uncomfortable, the chambers have Ambassadors to help,” she suggested.

Focusing on developing the relationship seems to be the key to successful networking. This is accomplished by having a strategy and redefining conversational rituals.

Vivian House also had some advice for networkers.

“You can’t do it unless you go out and do it!”

Marcia Hall, the *Reputation Pro* with **Reputation COUNTS**, is a Certified Contacts Count Presenter, who helps you develop your most powerful asset - **your personal reputation**. To learn more about building your networking skills, please visit <http://www.reputationcounts.com/networking>

This article appeared in the Capital/Gazette Publication, *Anne Arundel County Business Break*, in the June 2005 edition.