

COMPLETE GUIDE TO HEALTHY NETWORKING

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We've all met the networking addicts. They show up at events with no planning or forethought, indiscriminately handing out business cards like candy and hoping they will come home with a sale. In most cases they simply wake up with a networking hangover!

Healthy networking, like all good marketing begins with a plan. This workbook outlines a multi-step process to create a plan for your own referral addiction.

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STEP 1: WHY NETWORK?

Networking is a cost effective strategy to build your business. With a solid base of contacts and referral sources, a true networking junkie can say goodbye to cold calling and scale back on expensive advertising.

Why? Because potential clients introduced through referrals are already favorably predisposed to do business with you. You'll spend less time on introductions and trust building when the call has been pre-warmed with a referral. You are more likely to close the sale, and close it faster, because referral clients feel as if they know you.

Customers make decisions with their head and their hearts. The “head” logically compares features, benefits and pricing. The “heart” focuses on how comfortable they feel with you. Will you live up to your promises and deliver the level of service for which they are looking?

Getting to know you through a referral or networking group allows potential customers to answer questions of the “heart”.

At the same time, getting to know potential clients in an informal setting helps you understand what is important to them, preparing you for quality conversations which lead to sales opportunities

To Get the Most Out of This Guide:

- Make useful notes. Capture ideas and action plans along the way.
- Practice opening lines, questions and conversation closers with a friend.
- Find networking events and try these techniques in the real world.

STEP 2: WHERE TO NETWORK

In most cities there are networking opportunities each week. A quick review of the business pages of your local newspaper will reveal a list of events including; the local Chamber of Commerce, Kiwanis Club, and possibly few chapters of BNI, (Business Network International) PRE (Professional Referral Exchange), Info Connection or other organized networking groups.

In addition, industry specific trade associations, small business organizations, and men's and woman's clubs all provide opportunities to meet people.

WHERE TO GO?

Here's your first exercise. Review local papers and community information websites such Meetup.com and make a list of networking events to consider attending:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

How do you choose from this list? Randomly picking events will burn your time and your resources, and may not deliver the results you are seeking. Instead, define your goals before you walk out the door. Think about who you want to meet and systematically evaluate and select events which will help you find the “right people”.

The “**Right People**” may not necessarily be customers. In many cases the best connections are other business professionals who call on your customers, offering products and services which compliment what you offer.

For example a photographer interested in growing his wedding business would be wise to seek relationships with at least one caterer, florist, baker, jeweler, and invitation designer. The reason should be obvious: the average bride will spend \$20,000 on her wedding. Having a solid network of people who are talking to brides allows him to reach more potential customers.

The same process works in the home services industry. A smart heating contractor should have relationships with a roofer, carpenter, maid service, painter, remodeling contractor, electrician and snow removal company.

The average homeowner is doing something in their home every few months so creating a network of associates on the look-out for opportunities simply expands the contractor's sales force. Other potential candidates for his referral network might include: a home inspector, real estate agent, insurance salesman and mortgage broker.

Even B2B organizations can benefit from the same approach. Businesses, just like homeowners need many things. Who else is calling on your customer? What other services do they need? What types of businesses should be in your referral circle?

WHAT TYPE OF SERVICES DO YOUR CLIENTS NEED?

Make a list of possible professions to include in your referral circle.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Next think about the contacts you have already. Do you know someone to fill each slot? Think about people who have similar business values, who treat clients the way you do. Companies who share business values make the best referral partners. If no one comes to mind, this is a good starting point for your networking activities.

WHO WILL YOU TRUST WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

STEP 3 – GET INVOLVED

Finding a room full of the right people is only half the battle. Doing a bit of research to evaluate the opportunities for visibility and credibility is another other key element in your decision process.

Creating a presence takes time and effort. It is unrealistic to attend a meeting once or twice and expect results. People will rarely open their Rolodex or refer their best customers after a brief conversation over rubber chicken or a stale Danish.

For groups meeting only once a month it may be six or seven months before you begin generating sales. People need to get to know you before they hand you a lead. There are ways to accelerate the process, but you must get involved! That means you can't show up late and leave early. You have to be there and be visible; recognized by members, engaged in the conversations, and in the center of the activity.

Not every group will afford you the same opportunities. Before you commit to getting involved, consider the following:

EVALUATE THE GROUPS

How crowded is the event? While a little competition should not deter you, groups that are well saturated with competitors may not be the best place for you to spend your time.

Can you get involved? Look for a committee which gives you exposure to the membership. A plumber joined the membership committee of the local chamber. His task was to deliver the welcome packets to new members. As a result, he met every new member of the chamber. When he went to a meeting, everyone knew Dave, and when they needed a plumber, he was the first one they called.

Who is on the board? Are these people with whom you want to associate – potential clients or referral sources?

Is there a board position or committee chairmanship that lines up with your interest or skills? Leadership roles give you a chance to showcase your skills and core competencies. Handling a committee project well helps potential clients visualize how you could handle their project.

Being involved and active has benefits beyond the organization itself. Board members are often interviewed or quoted in the local papers. An insurance saleswoman became president of a local woman's group. Every time she was quoted in the paper she received calls and emails from potential clients and business associates.

EVALUATE COMMUNICATION AND PROMOTION VEHICLES.

Do they have a newsletter, website or face to face events? These vehicles can be used as a forum to showcase your expertise. Write an article or volunteer to give a presentation on a topic in which you are an expert. It is always easier to remember the featured speaker.

Are there sponsorship and partnership opportunities? Does the group have affordable sponsorship opportunities which will raise your image among your target customers?

Can you improve your knowledge base? Another reason to select a particular networking event is the chance to learn something new. Look for interesting programs which enhance your skills or make you more familiar with the issues important to your target customers.

As you select a group in which to be involved consider all that the group offers. Commit to doing the work involved to make the most of your membership. It is called networking for a reason. If it was easy, it would be called NET-PLAYING.

As you commit to a plan of action, written goals with measurable objectives and time lines will keep you on track. Use the chart on the next page to create and monitor goals for your networking activities.

NOTES:

STEP 4 – START THE CONVERSATION

Now you are ready to attend an event. For many people walking in the door of a networking event brings back memories of a middle school dance. You remember standing in a corner, palms sweating, staring at your feet, hoping someone would talk to you? That strategy didn't work in 7th grade, and it won't work now.

Just like 7th grade, people come to a networking event to “dance”. Everyone is there to meet people. Successful networking junkies make it easy for other people to meet them!

Help people remember your name

Always wear a name badge, and then help people remember your name by making it visible. Print your name legibly on your name badge and place it on your right side. It is more readable when you extend your hand. (This is so simple, and so often overlooked.)

Be approachable

As you walk into a room position yourself just to the right of the door. As people walk into a room they will naturally turn slightly right and begin to move in a counter clockwise pattern. If you stand just to the right of the door you will be in a position to greet people as they enter the room. This technique allows you to “act like a host” even if it is your first time at the event.

An alternative technique, if you feel uncomfortable standing in one place, is to move slowly in a clockwise direction around the room. You will naturally run into all those people moving in a counter clockwise direction.

An interesting phenomenon that occurs at networking events is something I call “Mirroring”. Unsure of the rules, people will typically match a greeting without realizing they are doing it. If you say, “Hi, my name is John”, the other person will typically respond by saying, “Hi, my name is Mary”. If you say, “Hello, my name is John Smith”, it is likely the other person will reply, “Hello, my name is Mary Jones”.

Once you get comfortable you can vary your opening line to create different responses. For example, consider providing a bit more information in your introduction such as “Hi, my name is John Smith, and I own

Smith Heating”. The other person will probably reply in kind. “My name is Mary Jones, and I work for Charter Real Estate.”

Be careful not to make your introduction too long or you will lose the listener. Once you have introduced yourself, you are on your way to a conversation. Simple questions are a great way to keep the conversation going.

HERE ARE SOME OF MY FAVORITES:

- Is this your first time here?
- How did you hear about the program?
- I’m new. Do you know anything about the program? People love to be knowledgeable and share what they know. This question allows them to be an expert.
- Why did you come today?
- What other groups do you belong to?

Make a list of some of your favorite opening lines, and practice them until they feel natural. Don’t have any favorites? Listen to how other people open the conversation at the next networking event you attend and write down your favorites

OPENING LINES

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Another technique that works very well for novice networkers is attending events with an associate. If you do this be sure you don't spend all evening talking to each other. Agree to split up as you enter the room. Periodically touch base, introduce each other to someone you have just met and split up again

Knowing at least one other person in the room gives you twice as many opportunities to make good contacts. They can also help you transition out of a conversation, with a hand off when you are ready for your next conversation.

STEP 5 – WHAT DO YOU DO?

Sooner or later the networking conversation winds its way around to the question - What do you do? Most networking and sales training classes include a section on how to answer this question. It usually entails a sixty second sound bite, detailing who you are, what you do, and who you want to meet.

If you have one of these well rehearsed sixty second sound bites, forget it! Why? Because sixty seconds is a very long time and people don't have a long attention span.

Your listener is probably willing to give you about 10 seconds initially. If you catch their attention in the first few seconds, you will earn the right to tell them more about yourself later in the conversation.

Scale your response back to about 10 or 15 words. For example:

- We help small business owners use internet marketing tools to generate leads.
- I make people comfortable in their home.
- I protect company information with computer security systems.

Keep your reply simple and to the point. If they are interested, the listener will ask a follow-up question giving you an opportunity to provide a slightly longer answer. If they do not ask any follow-up question, they probably are not interested, so do not waste your breath.

How do you describe your business in 10 seconds? Develop a few answers and try them out when you are networking. Eventually you'll find one that feels natural and keeps the conversation going.

WRITE YOUR TEN SECOND INTRODUCTION

Consider ending your answer with “And what do you do?” Learning to talk less and listen more will help you make the most of the time spent at networking events. It is highly unlikely that you'll make a sale at a Chamber meeting, so don't try to! Instead, use the time to find people you might be interested in learning more about later.

It is highly unlikely you will make a sale at a Chamber of Commerce meeting, so don't try. Instead, use the time to find people who you might be interested in learning more about at a later time.

Remember this is not necessarily a room full of customers. Your mission at networking events should be to find other business professionals you want to add to your network. These are people who will refer you to their clients, and people you will feel comfortable referring to yours.

To determine if you are talking to someone who is a good candidate for a follow up conversation ask questions:

- How long have you been a plumber, doctor, or teacher?
- How did you get started?
- Tell me about your most interesting, challenging or favorite customers.
- Who are good referral sources for your?

This will identify companies which serve your target customer. Their responses will also give you insights into how they handle customers.

Think about the conversation like a tennis match. You want to make contact with the ball and send it back over the net. Without making someone feel like they are being interrogated you can learn a lot in a few minutes with several good questions.

NETWORKING QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION GENERATORS

STEP 6 – EXCHANGE BUSINESS CARDS

After a few minutes of conversation it is appropriate and polite to ask for a business card. This is more important than giving one of yours. With their card in hand you have control over the next step. You can call or write to establish a follow up connection.

When exchanging cards you should take a lesson from the Japanese. In Japan, business interactions are more formal than here in the United States. Upon meeting another business professional, the exchange of business cards is done with a bit of ceremony.

Cards are presented with two hands and a slight bow. The card is accepted with two hands and a slight bow as well. This behavior would seem odd at a local chamber of commerce meeting, but the action of honoring the business card is extremely powerful.

When handed a card, pause and read it. Comment on the logo, colors or tagline. Watch the body language of the other person, particularly if they are the business owner. They will stand up a little straighter and smile. The simple gesture conveys respect and interest.

Conversely, watch as other people ask for your card, and then simply shove it in their pocket. Once you see how that feels it is easy to resolve never to do that to anyone else!

NOTES:

STEP 7 – MOVE ON

Networking conversations are only the beginning. Many more in-depth connections will be required to solidify a referral relationship. These longer conversations take place over time, outside of the network event.

At the event itself, your goal is to have many brief conversations to identify candidates for more in-depth connections. After a few minutes of polite conversation and an exchange of business cards it is time to move on. Ending a conversation is more challenging than beginning one.

Practice some of these phrases until they feel natural.

- It was nice to meet you. I hope you enjoy the event. (As you say this, take a step away. The physical movement is a cue to the other person who- still in mirror mode- will also back away.).
- I really enjoyed meeting you and would like to find out more about your business. Maybe we could meet for coffee, lunch, etc. Only offer this if you mean it. Don't promise something you won't do. In the short term, it creates an easy escape but may make it uncomfortable the next time you see the person at another event.
- There is someone I want you to meet. This is called the "handoff" and works really well if you know other people in the room. The payoff here may be making a great connection between two people who will remember you every time they get together.

Whichever technique you use, say goodbye and start the process again. Write down some of the best closing lines you have heard.

NOTES:

STEP 8 – AFTER THE EVENT

The event is over. You return home and empty your pockets, putting the business cards you've collected onto the desk.

What comes next? If you are one of those people who organize business cards in neat piles, tied with a rubber band with a promise to get to them someday, toss them in the trash! Don't bother going out again if you don't follow-up within 24 to 48 hours. By then it's too late. No one said this was easy. Networking is work!

If you've met quite a few people, sort through the cards and select one or two with whom you want to follow-up. Send an email or a hand written card within 48 hours. The message does not have to be long. It should, however, remind the person where you met and open the door for a future conversation.

Your follow-up messages should look something like this:

- It was nice to meet you at the Women's Fair.
- I would enjoy a chance to continue our conversation to find out more about your business. Are you available for coffee, lunch, etc.?

It should not include a detailed outline of your services. Nor should you automatically enroll them in your email program. This is just the first step in a process of building the relationship.

When evaluating whom you want to follow-up with and stay in touch, think about what you can do for them. Be fair- if you can't see yourself ever referring any business their way, don't waste their time or yours cultivating the relationship.

After you have sent your follow up notes or made a few phone calls, it's time to organize your contacts. This does not mean sorting them alphabetically and putting them in a box or binder. That tactic was fine in 1977 but it's not enough today.

To use the contacts you have collected, you must organized the data electronically, in an electronic data base, spread sheet or contact management program. The availability of affordable, easy-to-use contact management systems has made this process something everyone can do.

No one format makes sense for every business. It can be as simple as a spread sheet, the address book in Outlook or a more complex CRM system like Insightly or SalesForce.com. Evaluate potential programs by looking for easy-to-use tools with the ability to create output reports in a useful format. (A useful format is what makes sense to you, not someone else!)

Create a data base with the basic information. Name, address, title, phone and email are only starting points. For your networking data base, be sure to capture industry and key markets served. At some point a client may ask you “Do you know someone who...” With an electronic data base, names, addresses and phone numbers are a few key strokes away.

Once you’ve established a clean, usable database filled with your new contacts, it’s time to get social. LinkedIn.com is a fantastic place to keep your valued networking contacts and leads. If you haven’t created an account yet, registering is quick and easy, requiring only your name and email. Setting up your profile page is as simple as uploading your most recent resume and filling in the required fields.

When you’re ready, use LinkedIn to find all of the contacts you’ve put in your database. You can use the search function to find your new contacts via their email address, first name, last name, job title and place of employment. Make sure to mention meeting the contact at a networking event when sending your digital invites.

Sending friendly greetings through LinkedIn’s proprietary messaging system InMail is a great way to get in touch with potential referrals. Don’t be afraid to reach out to someone you’ve added to your network if you need help with a solution they are able to help solve or if you want to send them a referral.

STEP 9 - USE THE INFORMATION

A well organized data base is the foundation of your marketing activities. Beyond basic contact information you may want to track the referral source of the contact. A year from now when it is time to renew your membership in a networking group your data base will help you determine which groups have delivered the most valuable connections.

What else should you track? A complete data base will include conversation summaries, follow-up reminders, commitments and “hot topics”.

Relationships are built over time, so recording things of interest to your contacts gives you the chance stay in touch. Look for articles of interest to them and web sites containing specific information, and pass them on! Industry specific web sites and trade journals are always a good source of information. Staying connected moves you to the top of the list. When asked if they know someone who does what you do, your name will come to mind.

WHAT TYPE OF INFORMATION WILL YOU SEND TO YOUR REFERRAL TARGETS?

STEP 10 – MOVE TO THE TOP

Combined and used consistently, these strategies and tactics will help you build the foundation for a referral-based business. The way to move to the top of the pile, stay memorable and get referrals is to give them.

It takes time to build an effective partnership- one that brings value to both companies. To make this relationship work, you must be willing to create opportunities for your partners if you want them to create opportunities for you.

Make time for your referral partners. Stay in touch through emails, phone calls or the occasional face-to-face meeting. Find out what is new in their business and share what is new in yours.

As your relationship grows, it becomes easier to ask for referrals. Be specific. Provide suggestions on what your networking contacts can say if they run into someone who might be interested in your services. Pick one product or service to focus on in each conversation.

“Word of mouth” marketing should not be haphazard. Keep your messages short. If the offer is too long or too complicated, it is likely to get confused or forgotten.

WHAT DO YOU WANT YOUR REFERRAL PARTNERS TO SAY ABOUT YOU?

STEP 11 – REVIEW RESULTS.

Periodically, review your referral sources. Have you remembered to say thank you for a sale that closed? A personal note, or Starbucks gift card (even for only \$5) is a nice way to follow up.

Every few months, consider buying lunch for the person who has sent you the most leads recently. Also, look for ways to send business their way.

As you review your referral sources you may notice someone who was a good source has fallen by the wayside. Take them to lunch as well. Maybe something in their business has changed, or maybe they have just forgotten about you.

An electrician noticed his referrals from a particular contractor had dried up. He called the contractor and they met for coffee. In the course of the conversation, the electrician discovered the contractor was selling his business. As a result of the conversation the electrician met the buyer and became his electrician of choice. Without the conversation the sale would have been made and that source of business might have disappeared permanently.

People come and go. Even with a strong referral base you need to stay active and connected, always adding new people to your mix.

MAKE A LIST OF REFERRAL SOURCES TO CONNECT WITH THIS MONTH:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

If you create opportunities for someone else, they are more likely to create them for you. Referral relationships do not have to be one-for-one. However, if you have made quality introductions which have turned into sales for someone else, you have a right to expect they will do the same for you. Use your data base tool to track this information the way you track referrals given to you.

It is important to track the referrals you give, for more than just keeping score, because referrals are personal. When you give the name of a resource to a client or a friend, you are connected to that resource. If they handle the assignment, professionally and competently your value, as a trusted advisor, or “go to person” increases. Conversely, if they blow the project, it reflects back on you as well, so pick your referral partners carefully.

Follow up with your referral partners and your clients. Ask if they were satisfied with the contact you made for them. Provide feedback to your partners so they can learn from each transaction, and ask them to do the same for you.

WHO HAS SENT YOU A REFERRAL IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

WHO HAVE YOU SENT A REFERRAL TO IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

STEP 12- BEGIN AGAIN

Networking, like any marketing activity is a circular process. As you complete one cycle, evaluate your results and begin again.

Make changes, refine the process and improve your results. The more you do it, the easier it becomes. As you network on a regular basis, your results improve, and you will want to network more!

Networking is addictive! Feed your habit for business success!