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Do you dread networking for new business? Have you read articles and gone to multiple workshops about networking but still find it challenging?

Consulting psychologist and executive coach Larry Gard provides some tips to take the work out of networking. In this article he shares techniques to help you refine your attitude and approach to networking so that it becomes more enjoyable and productive.

Several years ago I co-founded a networking group geared toward experienced, successful professionals. What I didn't anticipate was that many of these highly competent and engaging individuals struggled with networking. In off-line conversations they admitted to a host of challenges. Here are just a few of the things they shared with me:

- "I'm self-conscious in informal networking settings. I meet interesting people but inside I'm so uncomfortable that I'm not really fully present in the conversation."
- "I know that I should be asking the other person thoughtful questions, but sometimes my mind just goes blank."
- "My elevator speech isn't effective, no matter how many times I practice it and revise it. It feels like a speech instead of a conversation-starter."
- "Networking conversations seem too forced and contrived to me; they just don't feel natural."

These talented people are certainly well informed about how to network. They read extensively about the topic. They attend seminars and webinars about networking. They know what to do, but putting it into practice is another matter entirely.

For most of these individuals, it's not that they don't know enough about networking. Rather, they don't know enough about themselves. They don't understand the psychological barrier that prevents them from using the networking skills they already possess.

Most networking experts are quick to point out that the process is not about you; it's about getting to know others and determining how you can help them. The individuals in my networking group would readily and enthusiastically agree with that notion. They are sincerely interested in others and yet in networking situations they still find themselves feeling ill at ease, distracted by their own internal state instead of focusing on the people they're meeting. Why does this happen?

In some cases it's because they get tripped up by their own expectations. They tend to remember past networking encounters that didn't go well, forgetting about the ones that were uneventful or even good. Because of their selective memory they anticipate that subsequent networking encounters will be uncomfortable. As a result they're primed in advance to notice any feelings of self-consciousness or anxiety – and they get distracted from connecting with the person in front of them.

In other cases it's because they've prepared themselves on the outside but not on the inside. They rehearsed their elevator speech so that they would sound natural. They put business cards in their pocket and made sure their shoes were shined. They may have even thought about topics for conversation. All of that is fine, but it has very little to do with getting to know others and trying to help them. There is a disconnect between what they've prepared for versus what they're trying to accomplish. No wonder they're uncomfortable!

Here are some things you can do to prepare yourself before a networking event:

Remind yourself that your goal is not simply to collect business cards, and that it is extraordinarily unlikely that you will meet someone who is a perfect match for your product or service. Your primary goal is to get to know people and to determine how you might help them.

Look through your own list of contacts. Identify at least a half-dozen people who you could envision attending the networking event with you. Now that they're top of mind, you'll be better prepared to connect them to new people you meet at the event.

Give some thought to how you can get to know the people you'll be meeting. Don't want to get stuck in the same old tired dialogue? Then don't ask the same old questions. I know of a very successful young man who attends a lot of networking events. He hates being asked, "so, what do you do for a living?" because in his experience the discussion that follows is usually inane. With apologies to those in the insurance industry, he now replies "I'm an insurance salesman." Most

people make a hasty retreat and he can spend his time engaged in more meaningful and interesting conversations. You might not agree with his conduct, but the point here is to think about how you can draw people out. I sometimes start out with “What types of people were you hoping to meet here?” I also like to make sure that I have a clear understanding of the other person’s work so I often ask, “When I’m with my own clients, how would I know if they were a perfect fit for your product/service? Put more simply, what should I be listening for?”

Encounters between even the most well-prepared and thoughtful networkers can occasionally falter. Sometimes the conversation just doesn’t flow, or it stalls out despite your best efforts. And just because you’re trying to get to know someone doesn’t mean that you’ll click with him or her. I know a businesswoman who used to shy away from networking situations because she feared getting stuck in conversations that were going nowhere. She was concerned about appearing insincere or rude if she tried to extricate herself. I helped her rehearse a genuine yet gracious exit: “Thanks very much for telling me about your work; hopefully I’ll meet someone else here I can connect you with.”

Networking can be enjoyable and profitable on many levels if you adopt the right mindset. A little bit of inner preparation can go a long way toward helping you focus outside of yourself, which is the best way to meet others.