

How to network

Networking is a skill that, although daunting, can be very valuable. It's a great way to get your message across and once you've read these guidance notes and put your skills to use a couple of times it will become much easier!

Networking opportunities can occur at various interludes, be it at a break in a conference, seminar or even a breakfast meeting.

Why do we network?

There are many reasons why networking is important. The most important reason is to build and maintain relationships with key stakeholders. It could be your MP, other advice agencies or a local authority officer. All can be very valuable to your service.

Networking gives you an opportunity to raise awareness of your services, as well as and an easy opportunity to promote your 'brand'. When people see and hear about your services frequently, you become more prominent in their memory. This can be extremely useful if, for example, an MP has a constituent that needs general advice and they need to refer them. The first agency they should think of is yours!

Networking also provides an opportunity to learn about what is happening externally to your organisation. There may be things that will affect you in the long term, or there could be a potential partnership in the making. If you don't talk to people, you won't find out. Or if you do, it might be too late.

Preparing for the networking opportunity

When you've booked your place at a conference; or when you know you've got a big meeting approaching where they'll be a break or an opportunity for you to network, spend time preparing. Even at this early stage, it's worth thinking about potential attendees. Think about what you want to say to them? Write down key points that you would like to get across.

Start thinking of conversation openers for key attendees that you'd like to speak to. Is there anything affecting your service that is important to other attendees? Have issues been raised in the national media that are interesting for you both? Have they started a new exciting project that you'd like to know more about?

On the day of your networking opportunity, before you even leave your house, there is preparation to do. Make sure you dress to impress – remember first impressions count and you only get one chance at them. You should look professional but approachable, so people have the confidence to approach you.

If you have one, wear your name badge. It is likely that you will be given a badge at a conference, but if yours has your logo on – people will be able to spot you easily and start a conversation.

Finally, put a handful of business cards in your pocket – so that you can hand these out to key contacts attending the event. It will save you time and the hassle of rummaging round trying to find one. It also means that you remain looking professional and prepared.

How to network effectively

When you arrive, pick up an attendee list (if there is one available). Look through and note the people that you want to speak to. Look around the room, can you spot any of these people? If you can, and there is time, make your way towards them. If not, wait until there is a break and then make your way towards them.

Remember your preparation work – think about the most appropriate conversation opener and introduce yourself. Also, try to tag on a question for the person to respond to ensure that the conversation is meaningful.

Once you are involved in conversation, make sure that you listen actively to what is being said. Don't just nod occasionally! It's really important that you show your interest in what your stakeholders say. Try to actively engage in the conversation, always try to answer questions or have an opinion on the issue being discussed.

Also, make sure that you don't use any threatening questions. Phrase your questions carefully to ensure the people you are talking to aren't on the defensive. Try to keep it light, and if you can, subtly move the topic of conversation round to your organisation. Gently introduce your key messages that you have prepared. Try to explain why the person you are talking to would be interested and ways you can help each other (if appropriate).

When you can see the conversation naturally coming to an end, ask if you can stay in touch with them – it could be that they'd like one of your reports, or they will send you information that is of interest to you. If they agree, you should swap business cards. Following this advice means that you would find them in your pocket already as you are prepared for this eventuality. This is a great way to start your professional relationship with them.

Once the conversation has come to a polite end and you've moved away from each other, use the space on the back of their business card to note down any actions that you just agreed. Write down any information that you have learnt about them or more information that you would like to know. That way, you will know who's who when you go back to your office and complete your actions.

Following up

Writing notes on the back of business cards means that, follow up work becomes easier. You should complete any actions that you took away in a timely fashion. This could be as simple as sending them a copy of your annual report.

If you don't have any actions to complete, you could send a polite email saying that it was nice to speak to them at the event, and it would be great to keep in touch (be it over a specific issue or in general). Again, make sure you do this in a timely fashion.

You need to ensure that people remember who you are, and show you are interested in their organisation. If you wait too long, you are saying that you are not interested in them and that you haven't got the time to invest in them.

Also it's really important to look for an opportunity to show that you remember who they are and who they work for. This proves to them that they are important to you and that your conversation wasn't idle chit chat.

Remember

Networking is a skill that is worth learning. It isn't easy, but then as with most things, practice makes perfect. The more you do it, the easier you will find it and the better you'll become.

Always stay polite and professional and remember to treat people the way that you expect to be treated.

Five steps to successful networking

1. Watch out for networking opportunities
2. Prepare your key messages
3. Dress to impress and put your business cards in your pocket
4. Ask to stay in touch
5. Follow up on key actions written on their business cards in a timely manner.

