



Networth

Wallflowers wilt, so if you want business success, get yourself out there on the floor.

By Pam Kershaw

Word-of-mouth referral is widely acknowledged as the most powerful and cost-effective means of building a business. While some people thrive on business events where they can work the room and build their contact lists, others hang back on the fringes and regard such occasions as little less than social torture.

But it doesn't have to be that way, according to some of Sydney's leading networkers.

Global networking specialist Robyn Henderson, of *Networking to Win*, believes only a third of business people are effective networkers. The rest go to events with the desire to win business but with no clear action plan how to do so.

"The more specific you are, the more clear you are on the outcomes you want, the more chance you have of getting them," Henderson says.

Objectives should be realistic, such as to spend time speaking with five people rather than scanning name tags in the hope of finding a new client. While the five people you speak to might not need your product or service, they could well recommend you to someone who does.

You should arrive early and leave late to maximise contact time, particularly if it's a sit-down event where networking time is limited. And don't stand chatting to your colleagues, as that lessens the opportunities you will have for making new contacts.

Henderson has written six books on networking, the latest of which is *Network or Perish*. It will be published in September and has nine contributors, including Neen James, a founder of the Connect network, and Kim McGuinness, managing director of Centrum Events.

McGuinness launched the Businesswomen's Breakfast Series in Sydney in 1999 and now also runs the series in Parramatta and Melbourne. With a monthly attendance of about 250 in Sydney and 100 in Parramatta, McGuinness says her events are the largest regular networking breakfasts in Australia.

"People enjoy coming," she says. "The speakers are good – they focus on personal development, management style, stretching the thought barriers and pushing people's boundaries a bit.

"People bring their clients with them, because they know it's going to be a well-run event and they know the speakers will be enjoyable."

McGuinness says the number of friendships and businesses that have been created among people attending the breakfasts is "phenomenal".

"It inspires me to keep going. To see them when they first start, they are very, very green, looking into their coffee and not talking to anyone. All it takes is for someone to go up and say hello. They get drawn in and, next thing I

Good connections ...
from left, Neen James,
Carolyn Stafford and
Alison Hanlon.
Photo: Angela Brkic





A high-energy breakfast ... Maurice Gilet of BNI.
Photo: Angela Brkic

Toast and talk

Maurice Gilet, executive director of Business Networking International Sydney CBD, has two settings on his alarm clock: 5am and 5.30am. He leaves home very early four mornings a week to attend breakfast meetings of his 24 BNI chapters.

BNI now claims the status of the world's largest referral organisation, with some 3500 chapters internationally. Founded by Dr Ivan Misner in California in 1985, the group operates on a franchise basis, with master franchises and sub-franchises sold in each country.

In common with other networking groups, BNI believes that givers gain. But its structure differs markedly from some groups because only one person per profession, eg one lawyer or one accountant, may join a chapter.

Gilet says BNI adopted this policy so there was absolutely no conflict of interest for members. "BNI wouldn't be the size that it is, or be as successful, without this policy." Chapter meetings are very tightly structured and are entirely focused on maximising referral business for members.

Weekly breakfasts start at 7am and all members give 60-second infomercials about their businesses and the types of referrals they seek. They also advise the number of referrals they have given and received and the one-on-one meetings or "dance cards" they have had with other members.

"I really encourage my members to do dance cards on a regular basis," Gilet says. "The more you know about individuals, the easier it is to give them referrals. It also establishes trust."

At least 15 members are required to start a chapter. But, Gilet says, once 25 members join, the number of referrals generally triples and the dollar value increases two- or threefold. And, with attendance required at breakfast every week, BNI demands a big commitment.

"I use the scenario that BNI stands for batteries not included," Gilet says. "We supply the system, we supply the ongoing education, but we can't supply the energy."

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know they've gone into business with someone they've met there."

To McGuinness, networking is about getting to know people, not about collecting as many business cards as possible. "It's about creating meaningful relationships; it's about creating a win-win for each person."

Neen James, a founder of Connect, left the banking world to start her own communications company in early 2002. She decided to investigate a network of marketing people who could refer business and suppliers to each other, act as sounding boards and team up to bid on large projects.

Together with Carolyn Stafford and Alison Hanlon, James launched Connect in August 2002, and a breakfast meeting with a speaker is now held for about 70 people each month.

"What's been fascinating is the amount of strategic alliances that have been created," James says. "Some people who wouldn't have pitched for work because they didn't have the skill sets, have teamed up with other people at Connect and they've pitched as one business."

"We've also acted as a virtual marketing team for some corporations. I headed up a project for Westpac where I drew together all the resources out of the Connect pool. There's one invoice, but if the clients want to talk to the specific individuals, they can."

Stafford, who also quit a job in financial services to start her own business, has now formed an advertising agency, Highway 101 Financial, with four partners she met through Connect.

"We were all operating as individual businesses," she says. "We realised that we all had really serious experience in the financial services sector and decided to position ourselves in that market."

Other members of Connect are sharing the agency's premises and Stafford is expecting more to move in.

Ten top networking tips

- 1 Maintain a good database, noting the special interests and major achievements of each person. Make contact every 60 to 90 days.
 - 2 Attend networking functions regularly and become known as the key person in your industry.
 - 3 Give away a referral a day to someone in your network. With the law of reciprocity, what you give out is what you get back.
 - 4 Avoid keeping tabs on what you do for others. Give without expectations.
 - 5 Build a positive profile in your community and sponsor local activities.
- Source: Robyn Henderson, *Networking to Win*.
- 6 Stay fully focused on the person you are talking to. Giving 60 seconds of uninterrupted time is better than 10 minutes of half listening.



Robyn Henderson — the author of six books on networking.
Photo: Narelle Autio

Clubbing together

When Toby Marshall told a group of financial planners last year that the most powerful networks they could build were with their competitors, some reacted with complete disbelief.

"I was almost howled off the stage," says Marshall, CEO of Abacus Leading Solutions. "Two of the planners stood up and said, 'We can't believe you are telling us this.'"

Marshall slightly modified his presentation for the rest of his roadshow, but stands by his maxim. And given his reputation as one of Sydney's most effective networkers, his opinions should carry weight.

A specialist recruiter in the financial services field, he constantly receives inquiries about assignments that don't fit his core business.

"What do you do with them? By having a network you are able to pass on work that is less profitable for you," Marshall says.

He does pass it on, and is the number-one source of referrals in NPA (National Personnel Associates) Inc, a global association of 400 recruitment firms.

He also runs two networking groups in Sydney, the 1st Wednesday Club and the Golden Truffles Club.

The 1st Wednesday Club, with 300 members, has a monthly seminar program designed to help professionals build connections and business partnerships.

The Golden Truffles Club has evolved from this group and is designed to bring together groups of about 25 people who are natural referring partners, such as professionals who all service the financial services sector and can refer clients to one another.



- Refer business to contacts within your networks. Connecting is about helping people without expecting immediate rewards. They are then more likely to want you in their networks.
- Thank those who refer business to you with an email, phone call, gift voucher, flowers, wine or a book.
- Sit with strangers at conferences and seminar sessions - strangers are better considered as future clients or future friends.
- Sincerely attempt to heal misunderstandings. You can damage your network if you badmouth one another.

Source: Toby Marshall, Abacus Leading Solutions.
Footnote: Pam Kershaw is a member of BNI.