The Ultimate Guide to Business Networking Like a Boss

Ian Campbell, CEO
Mission Suite
Business networking has become known by business owners and sales people alike as one of the more effective ways to grow a new business. After all, if no one knows that you exist, how do you expect to grow? Getting out there to expand your network is the only way that you’re going to be able to effectively build that initial swell of awareness to do so.

There are plenty of reasons that business owners avoid networking – especially while they’re getting their businesses up and running. I’ve heard them all as I’ve worked with them over the years.

“*I’m not good in a crowd*”

“*I’ve never been comfortable talking to strangers*”

“*I don’t have all the details in my business worked out*”

“*I hate those mixer events*”

There are a million of them – and I’m willing to bet that you’ve used some of them in the past. If I’m being honest, I’ve used more than my fair share of them in the past myself.

Here’s the problem with that, though – you may be able to convince yourself but you’re not fooling anybody else. If you spend any time looking into how to grow a business, you’ll see that every expert, every talking head, and every guru out there will tell you that building out a network is the best way to do so.

Again, I’ve told myself these excuses plenty of times in the past as well. Every time I did – without fail, my business suffered as a result. I would either see a gradual dip in revenue or I’d find myself sitting around with no meetings.
Finally I got to the point where I had to get over myself and recognize that, regardless of the excuse, there was no getting around the benefits of networking. And it doesn’t have to be hard!
What is Business Networking and Why Should I Do It?

Ok so, as always, let’s start at the beginning to make sure we’re all talking about the same thing.

Business networking, at its core, is any activity that allows you to meet and create relationships with others in your business community.

These relationships can be with other business owners, other sales people, or others that are in similar roles to you. More often than not, the events that you’ll be going to will end up being a bit of a mix of all of the above.

Some people go with a focus on finding new potential clients and others with purpose of finding great referral partners to help them make new connections beyond the one event.

*Pro Tip: You’ll find more success in business networking if you focus on looking for referral partners and let the clients come as a byproduct of that.* It’ll happen, just be patient.

So why should you do any business networking?

Well the bottom line is that, as mentioned above, it will help you grow your business. At the end of the day, that’s the real reason that you should be business networking.

But diving a little deeper into that, I think that the best reason I’ve heard for business networking comes from a friend of mine by the name of Phil Pelto. Phil is the founder of the business to business networking organization Firestorm. Phil’s been a pretty successful networker and I always enjoy watching him work a room. He and I will have business conversations from time to time and one of my favorite quotes of his is that “cold calling is punishment for not networking.”
If that doesn’t give you a good enough reason to make business networking a primary aspect of your business development efforts, I don’t know what will. I mean honestly, would you rather go and shake a few hands of people smiling at you? Or make 100 dials to people who are anxiously waiting for an opportunity to hang up on you? As someone who’s had to do a lot of both, I can tell you that shaking hands with someone who’s smiling back is a lot more comfortable than having to pick up the phone.

Now don’t get me wrong, I know that there are people out there that would rather smile and dial and that’s fine. Sometimes I do wish that I were one of those folks that could look at cold calling as a sport but I’m just not there. And I’m betting that, if you’re reading this article, neither are you.
Where Do I Start Business Networking?

There are a million different ways to get yourself involved in business networking around you. First, though, let’s look at the different types of business networking organizations that are out there so that you can determine which style of group can work best for you.

**Pro Tip:** Try for a good mix of networking groups and make sure that you’re focusing your time on groups that are truly productive groups. Don’t go to networking events just for the sake of going to events and feeling like you’re being active.

Happy Hour Groups

Happy hour events are probably going to be the easiest to find because, let’s face it, who doesn’t like happy hour? Typically speaking, they get together at a bar or a restaurant – sometimes the same one every time, sometimes they switch it up – and simply facilitate an opportunity for people to connect with one another.

These are great for the social butterflies out there. Because there’s no real structure to them, it allows you to mix and mingle. You can create connections at your own pace. Depending on your personality, that can be a huge opportunity for you or the source of massive anxiety.

Panel Discussions

These panel discussion groups are always great because it provides you with specific topics of conversation to focus your time around. Also, because it’s typically a more topically focused series of discussions, often times you’ll find yourself interacting with the same people, which helps to deepen the relationships you’re creating.
The nice thing that I’ve found about panel discussions is that there’s always time before and after the panel starts, which gives you the opportunity to talk with others with a simple conversation starter like “so what did you think about the panel?” or “what are you hoping to get out of this conversation today?”. For people like me, who tend to walk the line between introverted and extraverted, contextual conversation starters are quite helpful.

The learning opportunities are also pretty great.

Meal Groups

Meal groups are another staple of the business networking world. These are pretty simple, people get together for breakfast, lunch or dinner on a regular basis. Usually they meet monthly or weekly with the goal of getting to know a smaller group of people on a much deeper level. Depending on the group, you may have a speaker or someone in the group will present.

What’s great about these groups is that it’s typically the same people every time so the relationships you develop become a lot deeper over time. This is where it becomes incredibly important to make sure that the other folks in that group are strong referral partners. If not, it’s not really work.

Associations

Associations are great if you’re looking to network with other professionals in your own industry. There are associations for almost everything – lawyers, accountants, startups, manufacturing – name it and it’s probably got an association. Associations tend to be pretty low hanging fruit for people uncomfortable with networking because it’s a lot easier to start conversations pretty easily with others in your own industry.
Roundtables

Similar to meal groups, Roundtables are smaller, focused groups of people who get together regularly. They usually meet weekly or monthly with a specific purpose of networking and helping each other find new clients. The difference here is that they’re usually a bit shorter and more focused on helping each other find business.

These roundtable groups are almost always the same core group of people at every meeting with the intention of taking a deep dive into each other’s business and finding out exactly how they can help each other grow.

If you have the right group of people together, these groups can be incredibly powerful in developing new business.

Ok, so now what?

Well now it’s time to start looking for groups in your area. Most places have a Chamber of Commerce, which should be able to provide you with good information.

Other than that, check out sites like meetup.com and eventbrite.com for different business focused events that are happening in your area.

Finally, look into any industry style associations that you can get involved in. Don’t have an industry association of your own? Take a look at a couple associations that represent some of your best clients. If you sell to lawyers or real estate agents, join theirs! More often than not there’s an opportunity to get involved at some sort of affiliate level. That will allow you to get involved on some level.

Now find something that looks interesting and REGISTER! You’ll keep making excuses if you don’t get out there and just start going to events. And the more you go, the easier that it’ll become.
What if there are no good groups in my area?

There are regions in the US that actually don’t have any good networking groups. It’s surprising when it happens, but it does happen.

If that’s the case, the answer is simple – start one! Take a look at the different types of groups I mention above. Then choose a route and get some business associates together and start meeting regularly. As always, keep it simple. Don’t make it too hard on yourself, especially if you’re just starting out.
Should I Have a Strategy for My Business Networking Efforts?

YES!

If you’ve read enough of our information, you’ll probably realize by now that I’m a big believer that everything should have a strategy before you dive into it.

The best part about your networking strategy is that it doesn’t have to be difficult. It’s actually pretty straightforward. I’m going to paraphrase this from one of Firestorm’s articles from back in 2017 that you can find here. Phil does a great job in this article laying out a simple networking strategy. Check it out, build your own and then start executing on it.

1. **Know your target client**. Identify the industries and size of business that you work well with and be ready to find them.

2. **Know who you’re trying to talk to**. Within those companies, who’s your person? Who’s the one who can make the decision to buy your product or service (remember, never let anyone tell you no that can’t tell you yes!)

3. **Make your list of service providers who complement your own**. Half of networking (if not more) is connecting with people that can introduce you to your target client. You need to get to know the people who are having conversations with your specific target.

From there, it’s a matter of **FINDING** those people and building a **RELATIONSHIP** with them.

Remember, don’t go to a networking event to sell. No one likes that guy.
What Should I Do Before Going to a Networking Event

Now that you know where you’re going, there’s some preparation you can do before hitting the scene. Here are the things that I like to do:

1. **Make sure you have your 30 second commercial down.** Your 30 second pitch is going to be how you can tell people who you are and what you’re doing. Make sure that you know your pitch and have practiced it a bit before going to your event. [Here’s a great article](#) that Firestorm posted on their blog about your 30 second pitch.

2. **Take a look at the attendee list if you can get access to it.** Often times event hosts will make the list public so that you can see who’s going to be there. You may be able to find friendly faces early in the event. If you really want to make a go of it, look through the list to find people who could be a great client or a great referral partner for you and seek those folks out.

3. **Make a goal for the event.** Goals help you get stuff done – including networking. Before you go to your event, figure out how many people you want to meet and what your follow ups are. If you’re looking for 5 potential referral partners to plan coffee with or looking for one potential client to follow up with, it’s important to make sure that you know what you’re trying to do.

4. **Make sure you have your business cards.** Make sure that you have enough business cards to exchange cards with as many people as you *may* meet. Remember that you may end up needing more than you expect so bring a bunch of them.

5. **Relax and make it fun.** Don’t put too much pressure on yourself. Remember, you’re there to develop relationships, not to close a deal. Take the heat off and enjoy yourself!
What Do I Do After The Event?

Now we’re in my territory, baby. There’s an old saying that “the fortune is in the follow up”. (It’s been credited to so many different people that I honestly don’t know who said it anymore)

Now that you’ve gone through all of this effort to get out there. You’ve stepped out of your comfort zone and meet some new people. Now you have to follow up with them.

I’m going to repeat that – YOU HAVE TO FOLLOW UP WITH THEM.

Way too many people go to a networking event and spray their business cards all around the room and collect some cards in return and then put them on the top of the stack on their desk and then forget about them. To be as straightforward as possible: Those people don’t make any money networking.

Keep in mind that the people you’re hoping to meet with met just as many (if not more) people than you did at that event so you have to follow up to even have a shot at being remembered.

Make sure that you’re reaching out to everyone you meet immediately after the event. Invite them for coffee or a chat over the phone. If you’re not following up you’re losing money, it’s as simple as that.

Here’s How You Can Automate Your Follow Up

The good news is that you can automate the follow up that you have to do at a networking event.
Using Mission Suite’s CRM, email marketing and automation tools, you can build a follow up system that will automatically send out an email to your new contacts immediately after you meet them and then remind you to call the high value contacts if you don’t hear back from the email.

I like to create a three bucket system for follow ups:

- **Talked about getting together again.** These are people you met, identified an opportunity that’s worth exploring and discussed potentially getting together again to discuss. You’ll want to follow up with these folks for obvious reasons (you made an agreement to).

- **Didn’t talk about getting together again but want to.** These are the folks that you met, had a great conversation with and recognized as a high value contact but didn’t explicitly talk about reconnecting. You want to follow up with this group because there’s probably a lot of opportunity here – you just have to dig a bit deeper for it.

- **Gentle Blow Off.** We’ve all met people who, while they’re great people, there’s simply no opportunity to business with them. It’s ok to simply say “Nice to meet you and I’m looking forward to seeing you at the next event!” Don’t spend your time chasing meetings with contacts where there is no business opportunity. Remember, time is the one thing that you can’t make more of – spend it wisely.

Now, if you’re not automating your follow up from these business networking events, you’re probably not going to want to use the Gentle Blow Off follow up. But now my question is this: “**why aren’t you automating your follow up?”**

There’s truly no reason to **not** automate the follow up from your business networking events. You’re going to send the same email with a couple simple edits to everyone anyway. Make it as simple as you can until it’s time to dive deeper into the relationships.
I gave a webinar not too long ago about using sales and marketing automation to generate business and focused a lot of my time on laying out this exact concept. You can take a look at that webinar here.
Back to You

I know that we’ve covered a LOT of information here and it’s kind of like drinking through a firehose but it’s important to make sure that this really lands.

Business networking is super powerful as sales tactics go and should be done plentifully! Remember, cold calling is the price you pay for not networking (Credit Phil Pelto). And cold calling sucks!

Mission Suite’s CRM and automation tools can help you super power your networking efforts by automating your follow up and making sure that the people that you meet don’t fall through the cracks.

Check out some of our Mission Suite intro videos so you can see how it works and then register for a demo of Mission Suite to see even more!