



By ALAN MANLY

Entrepreneurs are by nature interesting people, boldly launching commercial enterprises that risk careers and fortunes. But being a bold risk taker does not always translate into being a social butterfly, and the thought of networking events can send some into a cold sweat.

So, for those looking to make the most of these events as a way to engage business prospects, here are eight key things to help you get started:

1. Where to go?

Just showing up is smart but the question begged is just where should you show up? All entrepreneurs can tell you what market that they are targeting but the goal is to be at a networking function that has a room full of potential clients.

All industries have associations that sponsor networking events that are ideal for a newcomer to easily meet with like-minded individuals.

2. Invest in yourself

Prepare for the networking event like a showbiz professional. Practise your elevator pitch as you would a script for a play. Find someone who will be a fair judge.

Allow for the unexpected by having alternate lines just in case you need to improvise your elevator pitch on the run. Then practise these. Practice does make perfect. Sounds corny but each practice adds to your confidence in the delivery.

3. Get a card that counts

How easy will it be for anyone to remember you and your products when you give them your business card? They have your name and mostly the company name will suggest what services you offer. Some don't.

Consider assisting your new-found sales prospect by adding your photo to your business card. That will put a face to a name, as they say.

The back of most business cards are blank, so consider putting your service offerings on there to further showcase your value. When you hand over the card to your new prospect you can politely reference the card in your elevator pitch.

4. Show up early

Arrive at the event a little early. Always a bit daunting walking into a near empty room but opportunity can be waiting. Inevitably the organisers will be early. Use the opportunity to introduce yourself and ask what profile of business people are likely to be at today's event.

They will love to tell you the full story. With any luck an organiser will introduce you to the next person to arrive. One intro already accomplished.

5. Show time

As folks arrive approach them confidently and introduce yourself as a fellow early bird. You have every reason to be confident about being at this networking event because everyone is there for the same purpose – to network and get business leads.

If you don't feel confident fake that welcoming smile and keep talking. Ask them what business they're in. Don't feel inhibited about being blunt. They may even be relieved that you have the smarts to not waste their time. Offer to swap cards and check out if they have any potential business for you.

6. Time is money

This event is an investment in your time. The cost is already expended (known as sunk costs to accountants). Now you have the opportunity to turn that sunk cost into a profitable networking event.

Ask yourself, would I pay to talk to this person? If not, you owe it to yourself to move on. Politely excuse yourself and move on to another group or individual.

7. Once more with feeling

After a while you may feel that an event is a time waster. Take heart. Remember that you have spent your time and money being there so give it a few more goes with anyone left in the room. When you least expect someone to be interested that last one in the room may be the one you were looking for.

There is never a bad time to present your pitch. Even if no-one is interested you have gained from the practice. Should your presentation fall flat that is one more step to success as you know where you got it wrong. There is nothing like audience feedback to help improve a performance.

8. Follow up fast

Success and failure is often the difference between the quick and the dead. You have their business cards now you must hit that keyboard and thank them for their time and interest and assess their value as a potential lead.

Entrepreneurs who get out and network are well connected. The journey may take a while but after a lot of networking you will find that you are as well informed as most and maybe a little more than many.

The challenge of starting a new journey is not new. The quote from Lao Tzu in 500 BC summed it up nicely:

“*The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.*”

So, be bold and take the first step!

Alan Manly is the founder of Group Colleges Australia and author of The Unlikely Entrepreneur.

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