

Watch Out – There’s a Networker About

Do you believe, or are you being coached to believe, that business contact opportunities are anywhere and everywhere? That being alive to such openings is a way of life, a state of mind?

Conversely, as a leader of a business of perhaps moderate scale but some local profile, or as a reasonably successful executive, have you ever wondered whether you are being actively “targeted” by people who consider it would be helpful to their business / career to “know” you?

For this truly is the age of Business Networking, and apparently we all need to be doing it. If any proof were needed that networking has taken on a life of its own, see www.bni.com which claims to be the world’s largest referral organisation – even offering “‘Certified Networker” - Professional training for the serious (sic) networker’. Now there’s a certificate you’d like to see framed on your wall!

Networking is not constrained by circumstance. There are the usual corporate hospitality events and business dinners – fair enough - but sports clubs, school meetings, even parties (although, alas, never by the right gender and rarely on a subject matter about which one might enthuse) are not considered at all out of bounds. The tactics can vary from low stealth to outright transparency.

But why is this an increasingly pervasive part of the business world, and how does one tell the difference between someone with whom you think – perhaps naively - that you have a potentially multi level rapport; and someone who is simply doing their bit for this month’s business development targets?

For being the unwilling target of a networking project can sometimes impact on one’s faith in human nature. However, many of the potential protagonists have some discomfort in consciously promoting their business or career ambitions in this slightly surreptitious style. This might be - and it may well be a particularly English reaction - because we are not sufficiently on message that networking is a mutual process that can benefit the counterparty as much as oneself.

But is it not the case that all relationships are, at any point in time, unbalanced? There is, in other words, always one party in any business dialogue who is holding the stronger cards, however slightly, and this impacts on the dynamics of the relationship. But beware, these can and do change with time. (By the way, this situation unfortunately also seems to be the same for parental, child and partner relationships).

It is therefore advisable not to be tempted to exploit any immediate upper hand, as you may find that your particular contacts may have long memories! Or as Disraeli said, next to knowing when to seize an opportunity, the most important thing in life is to know when to forego an advantage.

So is networking a bit of a moral dilemma? And is the practice a science or an art? Should you be in or out?

In order to bring a bit of structure to this potentially confusing world of networking, and to understand why it seems to be easier for some than for others, I offer three genres of practitioners:

	Natural	Professional	Conscript
Basic outlook:	My work is my life, my life is my work	Schmoozer	I would rather be doing something else
Typical greeting:	“It’s a joy to see you”	“Pleased to meet you, my name is...”	“Er, excuse me, do you have a minute...?”
Attitude to peers:	Everybody is a friend	You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours	Never turn down an invitation
Attitude to the other networking categories:	Generally oblivious, genial to Professionals and polite to Conscripts	Looks up to Naturals, but looks down on Conscripts	Hopes to meet Professionals... dreams of meeting Naturals
Business expenses:	Believes that all living expenses are business expenses	Habitué of notable restaurants and hotels	Unsure whether to claim for that last round of drinks in the bar
Examples to be found amongst:	Airline owners, arms salesmen, retail entrepreneurs	Non executive directors, PR consultants	Solicitors, accountants
Motivation:	What’s in it for us?	What’s in it for me?	What’s in it?
Strategy:	Let’s have a party for 250 of my very closest friends	Lunch	I must think of someone to call...
Success is:	Another deal	Another fee	Another job

The above might be helpful in deciding the kind of networker you are likely to be. It is no use deciding which type you *want* to be, since that will always be dictated by what kind of person you truly are. There can be rare examples of networkers moving from one category to another. For example, the marketing partner in some professional firms may eventually transcend to the Professional level, although at this stage they have usually forgotten whatever they knew about law or accounting.

It may assist to think in terms of the recently recalled sketch from The Frost Report in the 1960’s. The 6ft 5in tall John Cleese, 5ft 8in Ronnie Barker and 5ft 1in Ronnie Corbett stood in a line, in that order, remarking upon life, and/or their place in society, with Cleese looking down on both the other men, Barker looking up to Cleese but down on Corbett and Corbett looking up to both of them. (‘I know my place,’ said Corbett)

Naturals are consummate networkers, they don't even think of it as networking. The ultimate goal for Professionals is to be like celebrities who are famous, well, for being famous. They are recognised for their networking skills alone and they are sought out for their access to contacts. The remainder are conscripted either by demands of their employer's business development requirements, or by a job search immediate or future.

It is in this latter area where, it must be conceded, it is important to take a less tongue in cheek view of networking. For it is generally reckoned that 75 % of new jobs are unadvertised and therefore who and what you know is paramount in securing these positions.

There is no getting away from the certain amount of calculation required in order to build a network, which can feel uncomfortable for some (Naturals don't notice, and Professionals don't mind). If some sense of personal embarrassment or guilt is inescapable, then it is possible to take some steps to ensure that every contact is not perceived as some favour being required.

The more reluctant networkers of this world should therefore seek to build networks before they are needed – which avoids asking for anything at the first instance. Also, a conscious effort should be made to keep in touch – perhaps by sharing news items, for example where some common interests have been established.

However, in the end, if you want to access the unadvertised job / business opportunities of this world, it is not possible to beat the networkers unless you actually join them.

R W Mitchell - November 2005