

What Networking Is...and What It's Not

There is a lot of talk these days about networking. It's easier than ever to find and interact with like-minded people, who may also be worthwhile business associates, customers, clients and potential partners.

Meetup groups, Facebook groups, networking events at the local level held by your Chamber of Commerce, or large – even global – networking events held at resorts or in stadiums are but a few of the options available to anyone that wants to take part in them.

Networking, at its very simplest, is meeting and interacting with others in the same, a similar, or a complementary business as you are in. It is a meeting of minds wherein information is exchanged – and information is infinitely valuable.

Historically, having the right information to offer at the right time created a distinct advantage over others who may not have this same information. Consider the advantage of awareness of enemy attack in the case of war, or knowledge of the precise moment a fruit would ripen and become edible in the case of survival. If you lacked this knowledge, you're certainly at a definite disadvantage.

The information that you have, others are seeking. The information that others have, you are seeking. The exchange of this information is what networking is all about. And reciprocity in networking is a common and accepted practice – and just smart business.

After an initial meeting of minds, it's important to continue to foster the relationships within your networking circle. Like plants, these relationships need to be tended, cared for, and maintained if they are to grow, flourish, and eventually flower and bear fruit. This isn't much different than dealing with relationships of any type, and that includes business relationships. The maintenance of the relationship is the key to the success of the networking effort.

The necessity of maintenance means that networking is not simply meeting and exchanging business cards at an outing or event. If you intend to utilize the relationship for mutual benefit to both parties, then both parties must make the

effort to nurture and maintain the relationship. This can take many forms, but simple emails and phone calls can go a long way towards keeping your business in the front of the minds of those you network with. It should start with a business card, but blossom after that into a viable business relationship that you both can rely on and utilize.