

# Who says women can't network...?

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**THE HENDRIE GROUP**

## Who says women can't network...?

Well if I didn't lead with a controversial title, why would anyone read a paper on networking? It's not true of course, women can network, and it can potentially revolutionise your business. It's just that in most cases, women don't do it as well as they could...

And the reason is very simply – no one taught us.

- *Huh? Taught us? It's all about confidence and personality right? -*

Wrong.

You *can* learn to network, and more importantly you **should** learn to network because it can be soooooooooo worthwhile.

Corporate buzzwords are just one of the many wonderful things to come out of the 80s, and the term "networking" has definitely lasted the distance. But there's a new one that I learned just recently – "time-suck." And I think it's pretty appropriate for many networking groups and events. They make us feel good, but ultimately don't achieve very much except suck our time...

So what are we doing wrong? Well let me tell you a story...

### Caren in the toilet

A number of years ago I attended a networking breakfast for businesswomen. They had two speakers (who were very good), but the "networking" aspect was just putting us on tables together and expecting us to interact. So what was the outcome? Well, every time I even accidentally made eye contact with someone they thrust a business card at me and introduced themselves. Of course this was while I had a forkful of scrambled eggs halfway to my mouth and in no position to take their card, shake their hand, and speak at the same time.



Truth be told, it didn't matter that I was eating, because no one was at all interested in what I had to say anyway. You know when you're talking to someone and you can see by the look on their face that they're simply waiting for you to pause so they can jump in with something about themselves? Well, that pretty well described it to a T.

The final straw came when I finally escaped to the ladies room, and as I walked out of the cubicle, there was a woman waiting by the basin with a beaming smile, and holding out her business card towards me.

- *Are you freaking kidding me????????????!!!!!!! -*

I washed my hands, picked up my things from the table, and walked out of the restaurant feeling, well, somewhat violated.

As I drove to the office, I tried to make sense of exactly what had gone down. When I'd left my house in the morning at some crazy hour, it was because I expected the event would help my business. Instead, all I knew for sure was that I absolutely never wanted to do business with any of the people I'd met that day.

I know it's an extreme example, but how many times have we left a networking event with a list of great new contacts that we never hear from again? More often than not I'd suggest.

So what are we doing wrong?

Well as I headed down Mt Dandenong Road that particular morning, I had a *light-bulb moment*. I realised that everyone was there for the exact same reason, BUT the simple fact that it was the same reason meant that it was counter-productive.



When I'd registered for the session what went through my brain? Well it was a while ago, but I suspect it was along the lines of "Hmmm, this sounds interesting, I might meet some potential new clients and be able to tell them about my business." I definitely know that I didn't think "gee, that sounds like a great way for me to go out and learn about other businesses, and how I can spend money with them."

Of course! It was so obvious. It was the *networking model* that was flawed, not the people. I wanted to do a u-bolt there and then so that I could go back and explain to everyone that I'd misjudged them and that I forgave them (I'm nothing if not magnanimous).

We were all there with the same agenda – to get business **from** other people. And unless we enter into the exercise intending to **give** business as well, networking can't succeed. In fact, it's downright contradictory.

### **The best bookmarks ever**

Business cards make great bookmarks. They're lightweight yet can withstand a little punishment. They're wide enough so that you can get a good grip, and they rarely slide out from between pages. Perfect. And when you give someone your card at a networking event, in many cases a bookmark is the absolute best you can hope for its end use.

Here's a hot tip. Handing me your card and telling me how good you are is not going to make me want to do business with you. If your card happens to make it back with me to my home, I'm sorry, it's a bookmark! Furthermore, I don't believe in persevering with a book I'm not enjoying (life's too short and there are too many books), so it may stay trapped between pages 50 and 51 forever.

Your business card is a contact tool, but simply handing it over with a spiel about what you do is not enough to compel someone to do business with you unless they have a very immediate need for your product or service.

You need to do more.

## First identify your customers

Regardless of the industry, potential customers fall into three broad groups:



1. Those who have an immediate need for your product or service and are "ripe" for a sale;
2. Those who don't have an immediate need, but may do business with you in the future;
3. Those who'll never do business with you.

Which category do you think always has the greatest number? Number 2 of course. The first group is obviously the most attractive, but you certainly wouldn't go to a general networking group banking on a high number of these potential customers. The third group

are a waste of your time, and it's best to know that as early as possible, because you'll be wasting their time too.

Armed with this knowledge and perspective, it's important to understand that when you attend a networking event, most of the other business owners simply won't have an immediate need for your product or service, or don't *know* that that they do (until you tell them). So if we accept that's true, then in most cases, our business card and a quick sales pitch is rarely going to be sufficient. The good news is that if you've selected your networking session properly, there are very few people who will instantly close their minds against doing business with you unless they genuinely don't have a need for what it is you offer.

## Fishing for business



I'm a huge fan of the theory – *"give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, but teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."*

So I want to teach as many businesswomen as I can to network *properly*. I won't lie, there's often a bit of effort involved, but the rewards are enormous. More importantly, these rewards are not based on luck, or waiting for someone to see an immediate need for your product.

- *By the way, I'm an astute businesswoman, so I also espouse: "teach a man to create an artificial shortage of fish, and he'll learn to eat steak!" -*

## **Resist the seduction**

Networking can be quite addictive. It's very easy to become a "serial networker" and find yourself attending networking events almost on a weekly basis. Now if you're feeling a twinge of affinity with that statement then don't worry, you're not a bad person, but you're probably not as productive a businesswoman as you could be.

Sharing great ideas and light-bulb moments can be very seductive. After all we're business owners, so we enjoy the creativity of entrepreneurialism (for want of a much less ridiculous word), and we are by nature "ideas" people. So it's easy to come away from a session feeling pretty good, and pretty soon you're looking for the next hit.

I studied a lot of French Revolutionary history at university (yeah, yeah, I know it's come in so handy), and the Salon culture always intrigued me. The concept of a forum where people simply gathered to converse and exchange ideas.

Having people articulate ideas we'd already been formulating, challenging us to consider other ideas, and of course, listening to the sound of our own voices, is quite intoxicating. And whilst it might feel productive, there is no value in it at all if you don't implement the ideas.

Many business owners suffer from an extremely debilitating disease commonly called FTI. *Failure to Implement.*

No matter how well the networking sessions are structured, they're a waste of your time if you continually FTI.



## **The businesswoman's practical and super logical guide to effective networking.**

Here are some absolutely sensational tips for incredible networking results (gratuitous use of hyperboles because they're my tips):

1. Potential customers want your business to focus on *them*. They don't want to hear about your business, how good it is, how great you are at what you do, or even your products and services. They want to hear about themselves. Their wants. Helping them solve a problem or a need. And the results.

And yet, when we network, most business owners don't do this. They focus on themselves.

Don't just tell people about the features or facts about your business or products and services, tell them what your business or products can DO for them! The benefits they'll receive and so on.

2. Think about the literal basis of networking. Do you remember when you were at school, and often essays would open with "The Oxford dictionary defines [insert topic] as ..." Well the Collins Compact Australian Dictionary defines a network as "an interconnecting group or system." Note the word *interconnecting*. Networking is not a one way street.

If you go to a networking session with the sole intention of securing new customers for yourself, then you're not networking you're selling.

It's about having a two-way conversation that's mutually beneficial. A conversation whereby you're able to learn about the other person's needs and *then* let them know how they could benefit from working with you. The emphasis has to be on them; it's not about you.

And you must be open to how they might fulfil your needs. How their product or service might be of interest to you or people that you know.

3. Ask questions don't just give answers. When networking, the most productive thing you can do is find out as much as you can about the other person. And what's the easiest way to do that? Ask questions of course. Not interrogation "machine gun" style (that just makes people uncomfortable) but taking genuine interest in them and their needs.

Let's face it, how can you know that your product or service is appropriate for someone if you haven't taken the chance to find out what they actually need? But much more importantly, if people believe you intimately understand their needs, they are more likely to want to buy from you rather than your competitors.

4. Network within and without. What does that mean? Don't be afraid to network with people in the same industry as you, BUT make sure you don't solely network with people in your own industry – unless they are your target market. Networking with people who do similar work to you can open up a host of opportunities such as:

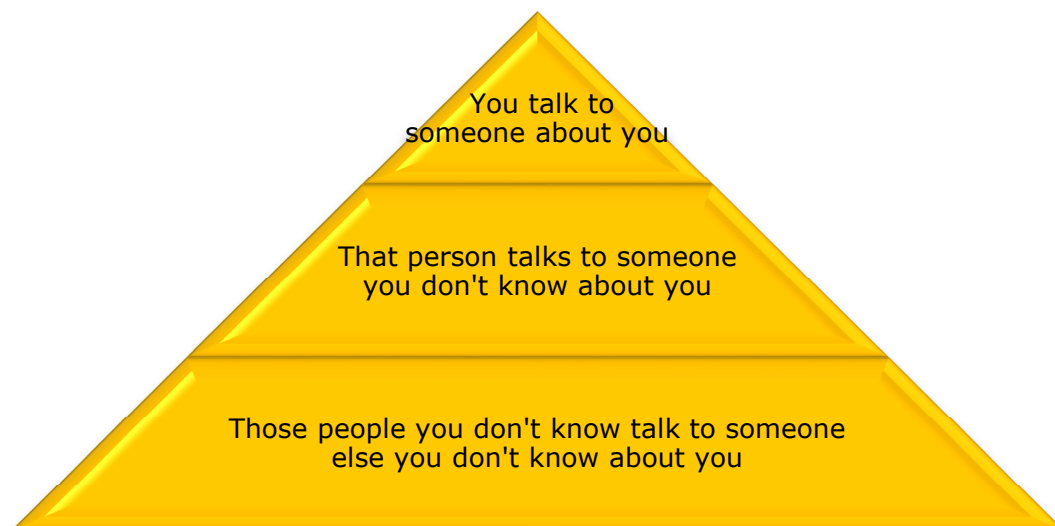
- Piggyback promotions;
- Referral sources for speciality services you don't offer;
- Client overflow - someone you can trust to look after your clients if you're too busy or away.

5. Be discerning about who you network with. If you're talking with someone and they are clearly not your target market, don't keep pitching your product or service just because the objective is to "network". That's just making hard work for yourself, not to mention inefficient marketing.
6. Often when I talk to business owners about networking, the response is "Oh yeah, I tried that once, but it didn't work." Most modern marketing strategies depend upon regular communication. The real power is in the **follow-up**.

Once you've discerned that your product or service is valuable to someone, then you should add them immediately to your database and make some sort of contact within 48 hours, even if it's just to send them your most recent newsletter. And going forward keep in regular contact.

7. If the person you've met networking is a fellow business owner then actively look for ways that you can help their business. Whether it's using their services yourself, offering them opportunities to promote their business as part of your marketing, or actively referring them to the people you know.
8. You are far better to concentrate your efforts regularly with one networking group than to spread yourself too thinly across a number of groups. Networking is definitely a case of quality rather than quantity. If you can really get to know a group well your opportunities for doing business and future referral are almost limitless.

We know that the cheapest and most effective form of marketing is referrals. So consider this "golden triangle" of referrals:



The real "buzz" about your business happens when you get yourself to a point where people you don't even know are talking about you. The best way to achieve it is for the people you're networking with to understand your business inside out – what you do, who you help, and where you specialise.

9. You need to understand the difference between real networking and simply socialising. A couple of years back I was asked to lead a networking group for young local business-owners (I was way too flattered to admit I was over 40, and unless they read this publication they'll never know so shhhhhh....), and I thought it was a terrific idea.

I had some amazing ideas and was keen to get started. However, when I realised that most of the other members were only keen to network over drinks at a bar, I bowed out immediately.



If I'd wanted to hang out and have a few drinks, I'd rather do that with my friends. Networking is about business, and while it can be fun and social, it **MUST** always be structured. Otherwise it's a.... yep, you guessed it, a time-suck.

## So get to it!



I started off this paper claiming that to be an effective networker, you need to learn the skills involved. Well now I've taught you, so you just need to go and do it right? Ok, maybe it's not quite *that* easy, but with time and practice you could find yourself reaping some pretty amazing rewards.

And if you want to join the absolute best networking group possible contact us!

Stay fabulous,  
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