



Networking

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Over 65 mentees, mentors and guests attended last week's workshop and network event, hosted by Engineers Australia, as part of our joint industry mentoring program.

Ron Gibson, network guru and inspirational speaker presented to talk to us about how personal connections are everything. People prefer to do business with those they have previously met or who have been recommended to them by people they know. This is strong incentive for business people and professionals of every kind to build up their personal networks.

He explained how the most successful people in business are invariably the best connected and how having connections makes growing a business and your career so much easier.

During a weak economy, the people who have built a network survive and prosper when others are struggling. In troubled times people with a strong and expansive network have a circle of people they can call on for referrals and opportunities.

One of the best ways to meet people who can help you with your business or career is by attending networking events. These might be meetings hosted by our local chamber of commerce, lunches organised by industry groups, business breakfasts and the myriad social functions associated with conferences, seminars, trade shows and so on.

The good thing about a networking event is the informal and relaxed setting you're in – it's an atmosphere where people who might be interested in you or your business are more comfortable to talk with you because both of you are outside "the buyer/seller" context. The value of networking events cannot be denied or overlooked as a critical way to meet people who can take you or your business to the next level.

Attending networking events is one thing. But making the most of them is quite another and requires the ability to connect with others and engage them in a way that makes them interested in conversing with you. The questions that you ask, the ideas you bring to the table and your people skills combined with your networking strategy and your willingness to give of yourself first (before you ask for anything) are the fundamentals of what it takes to make solid connections for your career or business. Although LinkedIn and Twitter all have a potential role in the growth of your career or business, nothing can consistently connect you with prospects like face-to-face networking can.

Ron explains that networking is about making friends and building real (strong and authentic) relationships. There are no tricks or systems. A great network is formed by a genuine desire to meet and get to know people and, most importantly, help them to succeed and prosper. The more friendships and relationships you have, the more clients you'll have, the more business you'll have. It's as simple as that. The hardest part is making the effort.

Here are some tips Ron shared with us that will help you to be more confident going to these network events:

- Be yourself. Talk real, act real, be real and you will find that good things will follow. Successful networking should be genuinely selfless and altruistic, always giving referrals, making introductions and opening doors for others without remembering your simple favours or keeping score.

- Giving starts the process of receiving. Real networking is more about what happens after you meet someone rather than the initial meeting itself. The key to getting the results you want from networking events is meeting people afterwards and getting to know them better and keeping in touch.
- Networking events are great for meeting new people—people you otherwise wouldn't get to meet. A couple of these people will need your services in the future. Some will know someone who does. And many will introduce you to people they know who will know someone who will need your services one day—maybe even today. But networking events are not the place to bend someone's ear for an extended period. That initial encounter should be just about rapport building, discovering common ground and creating interest in taking the conversation further. Your goal is to start a conversation or relationship that can be continued at a later date. It's the follow up and ongoing e-mails, phone calls and in person meetings that turn new networking contacts into relationships and transform relationships into business.
- Have an objective when you go to a networking event. That way, you will feel more purposeful and find your actions more directed instead of wandering around the room aimlessly. It could be that you'd like to meet a certain individual whom you know will be attending. Maybe you choose to find two potential referral sources for your career or business or for a friend's business. Perhaps you'd like to meet the speaker or re-connect with a certain someone you met at last month's meeting and who you'd like to get to know better. If you cannot come up with a specific goal for the event, introduce yourself three or four people and learn about their businesses and then make them aware of yours, which is an excellent goal for almost any networking occasion. Don't leave until you achieve your goal/s.
- Say "Thank You" a lot.....and put it in writing.
- Actively look for opportunities to connect people you think will benefit from knowing each other.
- After the event, review whether or not you met your objectives and identify where you might improve.
- Set a target number of events to attend (one a month, quarter, etc).
- Join a networking /referral group and attend events for parallel/allied industries. Attend one or two events a year that are out of your normal parameters, exposing you to new people who you may never have thought might be helpful.
- Look for ways to network beyond networking events. Sometimes the best connections are made when there's no pressure to network. Be friendly and look for opportunities to connect with others wherever you go.
- Help your colleagues, fellow-students, clients, prospects and other contacts get more connections and business.
- Make keeping in touch with your key contacts part of your daily routine.
- Take the time once a week to have lunch with someone who is important to you.
- Attend at least one networking event a week– this will help you keep your commitment to networking: you will build a momentum for gathering leads and contacts which will keep your business pipeline filled on a permanent basis.
- Get to know your contacts better. The more you know about someone, the easier it is to make connections for them and uncover opportunities for your services. There are four things you most likely need to get to know about your business friends. 1. Who their family members are and what they're about. 2. What their interests are outside their work. 3. What their talents are, their skills, their successes, their achievements—you can't advocate them and their business without knowing this vital
- Let your contacts get to know you better. The more they know about you, the easier it is for them to make connections for you.
- Ask your contacts to introduce you to people they know.
- Reciprocate. Give something back to anyone who gives you something.
- Show up early. If the invitation says 5.30pm for 6.00pm, get there at 5.30pm. The first half hour is often the most productive for networking.
- Stay a little late. Some of your best contacts will be made when the —official part of the event is over and in the final moments prior to their departure.
- As you leave the event, send a text message to those good connections you made, saying you enjoyed meeting them.

Happy networking. Maybe we will see each other at a networking event some day.