

Network like a Pro

By Barry Siskind

One of the highest ranking reasons that attendees identify for visiting an exhibition or event is their ability to connect with high value people. This rationale is at the heart of any trade event, which has buyers and sellers from a broad geographic reach under one roof for a finite amount of time. Networking always has been, and will continue to be, what trade shows are all about.

With the advances in technology, which seems to have moved people away from face to face contact, the need to network in person has never been greater. Yet, meeting strangers is, for many people, on the top of the list of social fears. These people ignore the potential benefits of networking and use excuses like:

“I don’t want to seem pushy.”

“I’m not a sales person.”

“I hate when strangers try to pressure me.”

Networking isn’t just about finding people to sell stuff to, it is about building solid business relationships. Networking is also not just for sales people; everyone does it at some time, whether they are at work, home, church, or at a trade show.

How do you network effectively? Here are six points to follow to add value to your networking activities at your next trade show.

1. Remember that networking is a two-way street

It's important to remember that networking is always a two-way street. Whenever someone asks you about your service, product, or business, be sure you ask them about theirs as well. You can start from the basics. What company do they own or work for? How they are affiliated with it? Who are their clients? Once that's said and done, find out how you both can benefit each other.

2. Create a networking strategy

Before you and your team go to a show, get together and discuss your strategy for meeting people. If you are an exhibitor, you will meet many people at the booth, but the show offers many more meeting places such as hospitality areas, hosted events, ceremonies, lounges, the registration desk, and participating hotels. Since each member of your team has different contacts, talk about who you know and who you are looking to speak with, so each member of your team can be vigilant for contacts for each other.

3. Understand the event's visitor profile

Your show organizer will have provided you with a summary of attendees from previous years. This information will help you save time. Your company has invested significant resources in your trade show, so you want to ensure that you and your team spend the bulk of your time with high-value contacts. Many of these contacts can be gleaned from reviewing the summaries posted by show management.

4. Understand your team's weaknesses and strengths.

Some of us are more comfortable in a hospitality setting where people are mingling. Some of us are better engaging strangers at the booth. Others find it easier to strike up a conversation in a non-business setting, like at a restaurant. When you understand your team's individual preferences and have a list of the people each of you want to make contact with, you become a more effective unit working in complete harmony.

5. Create an informal mentoring program.

One of the best tools for improving personal behaviors is through the development of a mentoring program. Initially, you can ask for volunteers among those people familiar with the show. These mentors can then help the first-timers adjust to the challenges of the show and hone their networking skills.

6. Don't burn bridges

A trade event is filled with people from your industry. They may not be interested in purchasing anything from you now, but you never know what their needs may be in the future. While you are focused on high-value contacts, don't ignore the future potential that everyone you meet holds.

Talking to strangers may not be the most comfortable thing to do, but with a little planning you can make the process a lot easier. Remember, you are not alone. It's a safe bet that the majority of the visitors you meet at a show are also uncomfortable with meeting strangers. Your approach may be a welcome relief.

Barry Siskind, President and Founder of **ITMC**, is a trade show consultant, trainer, speaker, and an internationally recognized expert in trade and consumer shows. Each year, he addresses numerous conferences and association meetings around the globe. Over the past twenty-five years, Barry has traveled throughout the world working with thousands of public and private sector clients in virtually all industry groups. He creates, facilitates and delivers a wide range of services to companies involved in exhibit marketing. Barry is also a best-selling author of trade show business books: *The Successful Exhibitor*, *The Power of Exhibit Marketing*, *Making Contact*, *Bumblebees Can't Fly*, *Eagles Must Soar*, and his latest book *Powerful Exhibit Marketing*.