

## **Beyond the Business Card: Networking in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**By Cheryl Ferguson**

Networking is more than just a buzzword. It's probably the best opportunity you will ever have to make connections, build relationships, and help yourself and others in the networking group succeed. Networking with like-minded individuals is also a great way to explore new career options, learn more about a specific industry, gather insights from peers on critical business issues and grow professionally.

### **Networking with a Goal in Mind**

Think about what you want to accomplish by joining a particular networking group. Are you looking for a job, trying to develop new business, or do you want to expand your network of contacts and become known as the go-to person in the industry? You can choose to be either an active or a passive member of the group, but will get the most out of the experience by regularly attending and participating in the activities.

Once you decide on the networking group that matches your goals, you can immediately increase your visibility by volunteering to participate on a committee. As a committee member you are an ambassador for the networking group; your role is not to shamelessly hawk your company's product or services.

### **Access and Exposure**

According to Executive Career Consultant Kathleen Jennings, of The Jennings Company, "It's not who you know, it's who knows you." Joining a professional networking group is an opportunity for you to gain access and exposure to people you might not otherwise meet: a company executive in an industry that you've always wanted to learn more about, a keynote speaker who's an expert in your field, and yes, even someone who may be in a position to offer you a job, or who can connect you to the hiring manager at a company where you've always wanted to work.

You can find out when and where networking groups meet by scanning the business events section of your local newspaper or business weekly. Visit the website of the networking group before going to the first event to learn more about their members, mission and focus. Armed with this information, you can go to the next breakfast, lunch, or after hours function prepared with questions for the members and guests you introduce yourself to at the meeting.

## **Use the Internet to Stay Connected Between Meetings**

The internet is a great tool to use to stay visible and connected to your networking group between meetings. You can:

- Search on Yahoo! for the name of the person you're planning on meeting for that informational interview.
- Forward a link to an article of interest to the new member you met at the last function.
- Send an email with contact information for a referral.
- Post a reply to a request on the group's message board.

There's a fine line between being seen as a resource and being seen as a spam artist; don't send excessive or inappropriate email. Make sure that your contacts between meetings are relevant and pertinent to the business at hand.

## **Listen First**

An easy way to relax at a networking function is to take the focus off yourself by first listening to the other person. This technique also helps you gain insight as to how that contact can help you, making the connection that much stronger. It's not about collecting the most business cards; it's about collecting the right ones.

Thank you notes and quick follow-up to requests for information are little courtesies that mean a lot. Your professionalism will be noted, your calls returned and your referral business will blossom. It also signals to the parties involved that you are committed to success – yours and theirs.

## **You Know You're Doing it Right When ...**

If you take advantage of all that networking has to offer, and if you have joined the right networking group, you'll find that suddenly, you seem much more visible. People will seek you out and recognize you as a valuable resource – an expert. If you're networking correctly, you'll find you have more visibility, greater knowledge, and a wider circle of reliable contacts; and that you can leverage those assets to further your career.

*Cheryl Ferguson is the host of The Recruiter's Studio ([www.therecruiersstudio.com](http://www.therecruiersstudio.com)), a career resources website featuring web cast interviews of people talking about what they do for a living. A recruiter with both staffing industry and corporate experience, she has placed candidates with unique backgrounds – a Rhodes Scholar, a U.N. Peacekeeper and an Anthropologist – as well as candidates with more mainstream experience – salespeople, scientists, marketing, legal and administrative staff – at start-ups, mid-sized and established companies.*