

The Art of Networking – an Entrepreneur’s perspective

I am often complimented on my networking skills! But in the same breath I’m asked, “why do you spend so much time attending so many events”, “doesn’t it hinder with your work”? To me networking simply means “developing your network” and it has helped my work tremendously – in the corporate and development sectors, and more so now in my entrepreneurial journey. My first few clients are from my ‘network’ and I constantly receive enquiries or referrals from known circles.

Women are often regarded as good networkers, maybe because they are better at multi-tasking and remembering names / faces. But really, there’s no instant-coffee route, and whatever your style, like any other skill, one gets better with practice. So I’ve attempted to put down some networking basics that have always worked for me, and here’s hoping they help you too:

- **Listen:** Like me, if you choose to attend a lot of events and meet a lot of people, be prepared to talk but also *learn to listen*. Networking at it’s best should be a two way street where you’re not just in it for your gain, but to collaborate; and the only way to facilitate a partnership is to understand the other person’s perspective.
- **Take interest:** I’ve known people whose idea of networking is collecting business cards! Actually, a conversation however brief but of value, is going to do far more in increasing your chances of being remembered than merely the formality of exchanging cards. Simple tip – people like to be asked about their work. Take the time to read the card and ask about their role – often you’ll find common ground for a continued discussion.
- **Connecting the dots:** In today’s highly connected, tech savvy world, most professionals, however highly placed, are probably only 2 linked-in connections away! Make it a habit to drop an email to people you’d like to keep in touch with; add people you meet professionally to your linked in account. Cultivate and grow your network, offline and online.
- **Persevere:** So you’re at an event and a possible client or investor is there and everyone is making a beeline for them. How do you catch their attention? First, do your homework and know exactly what it is you’d like to say if you get only a minute. If the person is a speaker, ask a relevant question during Q&A (not a tangential or lazy one!) and you’ve given yourself an opening for an immediate conversation right after their session.
- **Get introduced:** This is usually a sure shot way to kick things off. Get introduced through a known associate or meet one of the people accompanying her/him. Remember to brief the person making introductions and make the effort to draft a good email – it will count.

- **Establish context:** As a way to start a conversation, I sometimes mention a person we would know in common, especially when I've already partnered on something similar. It's a good way to establish credibility and also get a chance to highlight relevant work. Also, don't be shy to drop names (as long as you're not faking it!)
- **Attend B-school:** you don't get a blackbook full of top-notch contacts just by going to business school! But if you take the time to know your peers both in and outside the classroom (please don't be just a bookworm!) it's a fantastic platform to get access to a multitude of sectors, functions and perspectives...and potentially to the future who's who of industry.

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