

The Art of Networking 101

by Erin McMullan

Tomorrow morning, I'm going to a networking event—a breakfast meeting at a local chapter of BNI (Business Network International). Once upon a time I would have been nervous about this but now I'm excited instead. In fact, I've been doing a lot more networking lately because I'm putting into practice the lessons I learned from networking guru Colleen Clarke during EAC Toronto's September program.

Whether you're looking for that perfect-fit, in-house position or you're a freelancer who needs to cultivate a healthy client list and generate more projects, you should understand the value of networking.

First, you must define what networking is and even more importantly, what it is not. Clarke set out the ground rules: "Schmoozing and mingling do not equal networking." Networking is an exchange of services and information that benefits both parties. "It's about meeting people, finding out their needs, and filling those needs. You have to let them know you have what they need."

Networking can seem intimidating because it requires us to stretch outside our comfort zones, striking up conversations with total strangers over the coffee table rather than sitting with our regular group of colleagues and friends or sitting

alone in the back row waiting for the meeting to begin.

Clarke brought us a message of empowerment, emphasizing that it's our responsibility to make it happen. One of our biggest fears often involves the whole notion of selling ourselves to potential employers and clients. For many of us, this idea is in conflict with the values of personal modesty and privacy with which we have been raised. We may believe that describing our accomplishments or ourselves is undesirable, a form of boasting or narcissism. Shyness is also a factor, as well as the fear of embarrassment, of saying or doing the wrong thing, or worse yet—boring our audience.

Instead of talking about yourself, Clarke suggests using open-ended questions such as "What do you do?" and "How did you get started in the business?" When the question inevitably comes back to you, be prepared to deliver a thirty-second commercial explaining who you are and the skills and services you offer. If you are having difficulty packaging yourself, enlist a friend or colleague who writes well to prepare a script that you can use until you are more comfortable with ad-libbing.

Clarke suggests preparing two scripts: Business Spiel A for those inside your own industry who understand the terminology, and Business Spiel B for everyone

else, who may need a simpler explanation that gets right to the point.

You should also have three stories ready to illustrate the innovative ways in which you solved a client's business problem. Help your audience visualize exactly what it is you do and remember that nothing sells like enthusiasm. Don't be afraid to use facial expressions and hand gestures to make the story come alive. Genuine interest communicates what a good listener you can be in a business situation and how effectively you can translate ideas into completed jobs.

One of the barriers specific to our profession is that people may not think they need an editor or may think that they can perform this function themselves. Your anecdote might then be a message about your profession and it could show the potential client how you can take away the pain or tedium from a particular job.

For those of us who are shy, Clarke suggests we think of ourselves as hosts instead of guests. She offered an example of a great personal icebreaker: "Where were you when the lights came back on in Toronto [after the blackout]?" "If you only used this one question," she added, "you would never have trouble starting an interesting

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conversation again.”

“Confidence is the key to networking. You should look like you don’t need the work,” she said.

Another potential difficulty for freelancers



is the fact that many of us work out of our own homes. Visibility is important, and both networking events and social situations can offer valuable opportunities.

Clarke recommends that when you walk into a room, you should size up the liveliest group of

people and introduce yourself, or sit beside people you don’t know and ask them about themselves. Even in a more structured situation where seating is assigned, you can arrive early and mingle at other tables before it is time to sit down.

Networking is about building relationships. For those who are just starting out in the industry, Clarke suggests finding someone who is more established and willing to talk to you. You can ask for concrete advice about where to start. Volunteering can also provide people with an invaluable way of getting to know you and see how you work.

You need to have a clear goal and let people know you’re available. Clarke emphasized how important it is to follow up on those potential contacts and offered some tips for organizing that handful of business cards you’ve collected:

- Write something memorable about the person on the back of the business card, such as “she had a nice smile” or “we

talked about X.”

- Staple the cards to a sheet of paper and label it with a heading such as: Editors’ Association of Canada, September 29, 2003.
- File the cards by date so that the information is readily available. If you start thinking about what you have to contribute rather than focusing on your fears, you too can master the art of networking. **E**

Colleen Clarke is a career consultant and corporate trainer as well as a workplace coach for the *Toronto Metro* newspaper. She offers career advice to the public in her column “Ask Colleen!” at www.monster.ca and is also the author of *Networking: How to Creatively Tap Your People Resources*. She has helped over 8,000 people in their career search. In 1990 she founded EARN (Executive Advancement Resource Network), a network of business professionals with a focus on middle and senior managers returning to work after downsizing.