

Networking Naturally

People have told me that I'm good at networking. When I hear this, I think, "It's so easy! It's what I do naturally." In writing this article, I'm dissecting what it is I do naturally and putting words to what comes instinctively for me. Here's what I learned when I looked under the microscope:

1. **Networking is an add-on to where my energy is already going.** I recently hosted a free teleclass. As each person introduced themselves to the group, I remarked on how I knew the different participants. One person I met at a seminar on blogging. One person was in a corporate team building workshop I delivered. Another person was someone I sat next to at a change management conference. Another person attended a talk I gave about rekindling the human spirit in the workplace. One of the participants was a fellow carpooler on the way to a coaching training. In each case, I connected with the individual because of a topic I'm already interested in—blogging, team building, change management, the human spirit in the workplace, and coaching. I don't have to drag myself to another "networking event." I make networking a part of what I already do.
2. **Surprise! I use my coaching skills.** Like many coaches, I'm curious. When meeting someone new, I take it as an opportunity to learn. At a college alumni gathering, I met a man who was the former director of marketing for a beer company. He had spent his entire career in marketing. What could I learn from him about marketing and how it has changed over the years? What did he know from decades of experience that no book could have taught him? After a few minutes, he got curious about who I was and wondered if I was a journalist because I was so inquisitive. Other coaching skills that I use are calling out what is (e.g., I'm having trouble hearing you because the karaoke is so loud), following the person's energy (e.g., I notice your face lit up when you talked about X and Y), and acknowledgment (e.g., Wow, I can see how organized you are to run your own business and take care of twin babies full-time.)
3. **I look for how I can add value to the other person in the moment.** I met a woman whose passion is teaching others the power of touch to shape lives, especially with children. I couldn't understand what she did when we first talked. When the light bulb went on, I offered up those words—the power of touch to shape lives. It was an insight that she could use in marketing her work. Sometimes, it's not an insight but rather a book or an

article or a contact related to the person's interests. Instead of making promises of adding value in the future, I do it in the moment.

4. **I treat networking as a two-way street.** Whether it's a potential client or future referral source or a possible collaborator, both parties need to feel that it's a mutually beneficial relationship. If both parties don't see value in the connection, it's time to move on. This happens when someone unsubscribes to my ezine or when I politely decline an invitation to meet for lunch or when an initial conversation goes dead. I look for ways that people can add value to me and vice versa, even if it's as simple as asking for feedback on my new website or inviting them to a seminar that could help them in their business. A subscriber to my ezine emailed me about office space in her building that she's trying to lease and asking me if I knew of possible tenants. This is a wonderful example of the two-way street.
5. **I keep the connection alive, no matter how brief the initial encounter.** It's not enough to find a connection where there's value on both sides. Remember the person I met at a blogging seminar? We talked for five minutes on the way to the parking lot at the end of the evening. It's up to me to find ways to keep in touch, even after talking for just a few minutes. Once I have the person's email address (either through sign-in sheets at an event I'm hosting or asking for a business card) I get permission to send a monthly ezine. My ezine has my picture on it. Every month, over 700 people see my smiling face, along with a short article I've written based on personal experience. I have had people I met two years ago greet me at a gathering and treat me like an old friend, even though I could barely remember their name. (It's an odd feeling since I don't see my ezine audience every month but they see me.) Which brings me to my last insight.
6. **I'm not afraid to show who I am.** Networking connections blossom into something deeper when people become engaged in who you are. Writing articles for my monthly ezine and blogging has been a way for people to see all sides of me—from the Damn Good Mother to the struggling solopreneur to the coach who is transformed by her clients. I used to think that I had to keep to "professional topics" in my ezine, until I realized that there's a lot of other people out there just like me—working moms who feel guilty they don't volunteer at school, parents who secretly covet their kids' soccer snacks, and human beings who, god forbid, get warts on their feet. One of my favorite articles talks about an adventure in buying a new toilet.

Often, networking is seen as a single event, a separate activity in our business. What I've discovered is that networking works best when it is an integral part of who I am and how I want to be in business. Successful networking is a process of deepening relationships, initiated through curiosity, unattached to outcome, guided by energy, and driven by the possibility of what can be created with another

human being. It unfolds over time, sometimes years, and rewards us with clients, collaborators, partnerships, and better lives.

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