

Networking: Your Most Valuable Prospecting Tool

By Don Cooper, The Sales Heretic™

Networking is, without question, the single most potent prospecting tool a small business owner, salesperson or professional has. It's low-cost and high-return with a great deal of flexibility. It even gives you an advantage over your larger competitors because people typically prefer to do business with someone they know, rather than a large, faceless entity.

But like any tool, it is most effective when used properly. Understanding a few important principles—as well as some strategies and tactics—will enable you to be a more successful networker.

First of all, let's be clear about what networking is and is not. Networking is **not** selling. Networking and selling are both components of marketing (and every salesperson should be a good networker), but they are very different things.

Selling involves informing, persuading, and negotiating. Networking is about meeting people and getting to know them. That's it. Once people know you, they're more likely to buy from you.

This does not mean that if you dash into a room, hand out forty business cards and race back to your office to wait for the phone to ring, that you're a good networker. On the contrary, networking, like other forms of marketing, requires commitment, repetition, and a long-term focus. Consequently, my definition of networking is: Meeting people and building long-term relationships with them.

The Key to Great Networking

So, how do you create and maintain successful networking relationships? The same way that you create and maintain any other relationship—**by focusing on the needs of the other person.**

Think about it. What makes a successful marriage, business partnership, or friendship? Each person looks out for the other one. If you always focus on yourself and your needs, then nobody else will. After all, who wants to be around a selfish, insensitive, egotist?

By contrast, if you always focus on other people and their needs, **they will in turn focus on you.** People who give, receive. And whatever you give out, you will receive back. (I call this the “Fruitcake Principle.”)

Once you adopt this mindset, everything about networking becomes easier and more productive. Take, for example, what is the most daunting part of networking for many people: walking up to a complete stranger and starting a conversation. The solution is to figure out what that person would most like to talk about. That’s easy—we are all our own favorite subjects! So ask about the other person’s business, kids, golf game, whatever is appropriate for the circumstances.

Asking questions demonstrates that you’re interested in the other person and gives you an opportunity to learn potentially valuable information. And it is a fact of human nature that if you give people a chance to talk about themselves, they’ll think you’re a great conversationalist!

Here are some questions you can ask in almost any networking situation:

- What do you do?
- Do you have a specialty or an area of focus?
- How do you do that?
- Who is your target market?
- Are there any particular companies that you are looking for?
- How did you get into that field?
- What do you love most about what you do?
- What is your biggest challenge?
- How did you hear about this event?
- What made you come here tonight?
- Have you been here before?
- Are you a member of this organization?
- Who else do you know here?
- What do you read to keep up?
- Where are you from?
- Where did you go to school?
- What was your major?
- How long have you been in the area?
- What made you move out here?
- What do you do for fun?

- Did you see the game last night?
- Do you have any kids?
- And perhaps my absolute **favorite** networking question: Where else do you go to network?

Memorize these questions, develop a few of your own and use them the next time you're at a networking event. You'll find the conversation flows easily and productively.

Playing the Card Game

The more people you have in your network, the more resources at your disposal. But if you can't remember the people you met, or don't have any way to contact them, they can't help you. Business cards are the keys that unlock the power of your network.

All too often, I'll introduce two people to each other only to notice that after a few minutes of animated conversation, they part ways without exchanging cards. What a terrible waste! Not getting people's cards is virtually the same as never meeting them in the first place. Make your conversations count by always getting the cards of the people you meet.

This is important even if you give them your card. Just because they have it doesn't mean they'll use it. But if you have their card, **you** can take action to follow up with them. And follow-up is the true heart of networking. Remember, your network consists of people you **know**, not merely people you've **met**.

If they don't have a card with them, give them one of your cards and ask them fill out their information on it. Whatever they're comfortable giving you, whether it's their phone number, e-mail address, or whatever, is fine. Because your next step is to follow up to get the rest of their contact information from them. This demonstrates your interest in them while giving you a second contact with them, helping them remember you.

After a networking event, you will typically forget all but one or two of the people you met by the next morning. And you'll forget **everyone** within 72 hours. To improve your retention, take notes on the backs of the cards you receive. (Bonus tip: Always carry a pen.)

Write down what you discussed, the time or place you met, what they were wearing, spouse's or children's names, or anything else that stands out at the time.

The goal is to record some kind of context which will help trigger your memory when you look at the card later.

There's a school of thought that argues taking notes in front of somebody is rude. I subscribe to the opposite school. When you're taking notes, if you say, "Let me write that down so I don't forget," it communicates to the person that you are taking an interest in them, they are valuable to you and you don't want to forget who they are or what you talked about.

One specific item to note is what their name is. I know what you're thinking: "Their name is on the card, isn't it?" Yes and no. Sometimes the name on a person's card is different from the name on their name tag. Some people do this deliberately to distinguish friends from everyone else. So addressing them by the **right** name becomes important.

Whenever you meet someone, look at their name tag and listen to how they introduce themselves. If she says "Liz" and the card says "Elizabeth", write "Liz" on her card. And when you enter her into your database later on, use "Liz", since that's the name she prefers.

Where to Go

Where can you go to put these ideas into practice? Lots of places! Look in your local newspaper, do a web search or ask some friends and colleagues. You'll discover a myriad of events produced by a wide variety of organizations who want to bring people together. Some events are open to the general public while others are exclusively for the members of the sponsoring organization. Some are free to attend, some require a nominal fee and some come with a hefty price tag.

You'll want to do some exploring and experimentation to find the events that are right for you. While there are all kinds of business and non-business organizations you can get involved with, they can be divided into five basic categories:

1. Trade Associations

Whatever it is you do, there's an organization of people who do it. Professional or trade associations give you a chance to network with your peers. While they won't become customers, there are still several advantages to knowing them better.

You can discuss industry challenges and learn from their experiences. You can refer or contract out business when you are overwhelmed, or when your customers want something you can't provide. (The competitors you refer will likely return the

favor.) You might even develop strategic partnerships to increase your capabilities or to handle work that no single company could manage on its own.

A completely different strategy is to join the trade associations of your target markets. Most groups allow “associate” or “vendor” members. By joining, you get an excellent opportunity to network with your best prospects. The relationships you build will be stronger than any marketing piece your competition can create.

2. General Interest Business Groups

These groups are open to virtually anyone, so you may find competitors as well as prospects within them. The best-known and most common are chambers of commerce, which exist at the local, state and national levels. However, there are many other organizations, including the National Federation of Independent Businesses, American Business Women’s Association, International Franchise Association and National Association of Women Business Owners. These organizations may host all kinds of networking activities, as well as seminars, trade shows and other events.

3. Lead-Sharing Groups

These groups, which go by various names (referral groups, tip clubs, resource groups), exist for the sole purpose of networking. They may be non-profit or for-profit. Members are expected to generate leads for other members on a regular basis. For that reason, membership is limited to one company per industry, i.e. one lawyer, one printer, one florist, one insurance agent, etc. Meetings are typically weekly or bi-weekly over breakfast. Be aware, these groups are serious and require a real commitment on your part. Members can be expelled for missing too many meetings or not providing enough referrals.

4. Service Clubs

The purpose of organizations such as Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, Optimists, Jaycees and Knights of Columbus is to provide some type of volunteer service to local communities. And great networking is a happy by-product of organized service. As a result, a service club is a terrific place to meet people and build friendships. While it can be a business opportunity, don’t approach it that way. Join a club for the service and the fellowship. If your focus is in the right place—that is, the goals of the group—then people will naturally want to do business with you.

Wherever you live, odds are you have a multitude of service clubs in your area. Choose a group whose mission and values appeal to you. You can find clubs in your local Yellow Pages, through your Chamber of Commerce, or on the Web.

Like lead-sharing groups, service clubs usually meet weekly or biweekly, although it may be for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Also like lead-sharing groups, they often enforce attendance requirements, so understand the commitment involved.

5. Special Interest Groups

Finally, there are a host of other organizations whose purpose is not business-oriented, yet provide excellent networking opportunities. They include:

- Toastmasters International
- Alumni associations
- Sport and hobby clubs
- Book clubs
- Men's organizations
- Women's organizations
- Your child's PTA
- Your local homeowners association
- Your church, synagogue, or mosque.

As with service clubs, focus on the business of the **group**, rather than your business. Look at these organizations primarily as opportunities for enriching your personal life. Any business that stems from your relationships with other members is a bonus.

With any and all of these groups, several rules apply:

1. Check them out before you join to make sure the group is a good fit for you. Most organizations will let you attend one or more events as a guest before requiring you to join. Take advantage of the opportunity to try out the group's meetings to determine how well they suit you and your business. If the group puts on several different types of events, try to sample at least a few.
2. After you have written your membership check, attend meetings and events regularly. Consistency breeds familiarity which gives you credibility and helps build trust. A person is more likely to want to do business with you if they see you on a regular basis than if they only see you occasionally. The more they see you, the faster they get to know you and the sooner they feel comfortable with you.
3. To get the biggest return on your investment, raise your profile and credibility by volunteering for projects and committees. You get the

opportunity to showcase your talents, build crucial skill sets and work closely with influential people. You will also typically receive appreciation, recognition and publicity.

Increasing Your Visibility and Credibility

Want more ways to boost your return on your networking investment? Consider these strategies:

1. Work the Registration Table

You'll meet virtually everyone who attends the event. More importantly, they'll meet **you**.

2. Donate a Door Prize.

Your product or service will be showcased in front of the entire crowd. And everybody loves to win things. For maximum effect and goodwill, make sure the prize is an outright gift rather than a "discount."

3. Write Articles

Virtually every trade association and business group has a newsletter or magazine. And they are all continually in need of articles of value to their members. Contact the editors of these publications and ask about needs, schedules, and editorial guidelines. Write according to their guidelines and include your contact information for the authorship credit. (Bonus tip: Get reprints to include in your promotional materials.)

4. Speak for the Group

Speaking at your group's events can give you valuable exposure at absolutely no cost. Anything from a ten-minute talk to a two-hour seminar can serve your audience while positioning you as the authority in your field. And everyone wants to meet the speaker!

5. Host an Event

For several hours people will see your facility, employees, products and/or services. You can even take guests on guided tours and give away samples or coupons to increase your impact. To reduce the cost, time, and effort involved in hosting a networking event, consider sharing the event with a caterer or restaurant. You provide the location, they provide the food (or vice versa) and you both get the credit. And the exposure!

After the Event

After you've met somebody, it's critical to follow up. Remember, people will usually need to feel like they know you and trust you before they buy from you. This requires time and repeated contact. Write a note or a postcard, send an e-mail or make a phone call. Give referrals whenever possible. If you have a newsletter, **and** you get their permission, you can put them on your mailing list.

By the way, don't ignore someone just because you don't think that they are a good sales prospect. You never know who might become a referral source, an information provider, or a lead to another valuable contact. Treat every person you meet with respect, warmth, and kindness. Your goal should be to build friendships first—everything else will follow naturally.

By implementing these strategies, you can become a powerful networker. If you consistently give without expecting something in return, you'll receive the respect, admiration and trust of the people around you. As a result, you can create a loyal team of unpaid advisors, consultants and salespeople who will be more valuable to you than anyone you could possibly pay. No other prospecting tool has this potential, which is why networking should have a prominent place in your toolkit.



Don Cooper—The Sales Heretic™—is an internationally-acclaimed sales expert who helps salespeople, business owners and professionals dramatically increase their sales. He delivers custom seminars and keynote speeches for corporations, associations, chambers of commerce and other business organizations.

His most popular programs include:

- **The Myth of Price:** Why you should charge more and how to do it
- **Never Sell Ice to Eskimos:** A practical program for powerful prospecting
- **The Physics of Closing:** How to make the hardest part of the sale easy
- **When Bad Things Happen to Good Customers:** How to transform customers from enraged to ecstatic

For information about booking Don to speak to your group, please call 303-832-4248 or e-mail Don@DonCooper.com. You can also find free articles, tips and other information at www.DonCooper.com.