



Beyond Networking

-by Bob Salvas

I have given many in-person classes and business seminars in my lifetime and when possible, I always tried to go around the room and give the attendees the opportunity to introduce themselves. As a presenter, it is always good to know who is in the room with the idea of making a session more relevant to them. But it is also important for the audience to know who the other attendees are. There may be breaks or time afterwards for the people in the room to connect. Good networking does not only happen at networking events.

In fact, sometimes the best networking takes place where you might not even expect it. For example, if you are at some sort of event or gathering, you probably have a shared interest with many of the other guests who are there (you all came to the same event after all). This shared interest can make it easier to talk to the people there than it would be to approach a stranger at a normal networking event.

You see, when you have things in common with people, it may not even feel like networking at all, even though it is. Many event coordinators are starting to catch on to this concept, and we are now seeing more specialized networking events where they add an activity- such as smoking cigars, trying craft beer, wine tastings, golfing and more. The concept of having a shared interest with other people can remove some of the awkwardness in talking to those you are meeting for the first time. It is also a proven fact that finding common ground with others will help build relationships faster.

“If I had to pick a first rule of communication-the one practice above all others that opens the door to connecting with others-it would be to look for common ground.” -John C. Maxwell

When it comes to building your networking relationships faster, the other KEY part is having that face-to-face personal contact. The pandemic of 2020 brought with it a lot of isolation and even the non-tech people quickly learned to navigate Zoom and Microsoft Teams. But it wasn't the same as in person---we all knew something was missing. A lot of research was done around this time about the real benefits of being IN PERSON vs VIRTUAL. One article I read in FORBES cited academic research confirming that in-person interactions build *trust* and *connection much faster* than *any* online communication. This, of course, surprised none of us who had been networking for a while. We just maybe took it for granted until the pandemic. That time reminded us that a lot of our communication is nonverbal and you don't always get all those nonverbal cues on a Zoom call.

“There is no substitute for getting people together in a room.” - Dan Kennedy

This idea of being physically present is what makes in-person networking such a great strategy for the businessperson. You should find in-person events that are a good fit for you and take the time to regularly attend them while also leaving time in your schedule to do the all-important follow-up work.

But, beyond those networking events you attend regularly, you should also consider going to other things. Does your industry have a regional conference? Are there some live seminars or classes being offered in your area about topics you are interested in or want to stay up to date on? Is there a golf league you'd like to join? Are there local charities or causes you care about that you want to lend a hand to and donate time instead of money?

I have heard countless stories of people connecting with important people at events other than networking events. You might be swinging a golf club with your next client, or you might be swinging a hammer next to the president of an important company at a charity event. And guess what? If you both truly care about what you are doing, that shared interest can lead to natural conversation and trust and ultimately to business or referrals. You cannot force these things, but you will be amazed by how easily and often they happen. Going to non-networking events puts you face-to-face with people who do not normally go to networking events.

One last thing. You might also want to consider hosting an event of your own. You could do a networking event, but you could do other things as well. You might want to have an event for your employees or an appreciation night for your current customers. Some of the best events I have ever been to have not always been perfect venues or the greatest food, but the organizers of those events always left time in the agenda for people to connect and talk with each other and THAT is where the *real* value was. If you do that and you are the host, you will get the appreciation of those who attended the event and who knows, you might even have a few important conversations there yourself!

So, go to those networking events; go to some non-networking events; and, if possible, maybe even host some events yourself. You will be amazed by what all these face-to-face opportunities will do for others and for you.

Of course, there will always be times when we do not FEEL like going to events. The couch is very comfortable, especially after a long day at work or if the weather outside is bad. But the way to success is to **ENGAGE**----so get up and get out. Remember...

"80 percent of success is just showing up" —Woody Allen

NOTE: There are three big annual events that take place in the month of November that local small businesses should support and/or participate in. November 10th is the Ocean State Business Expo (oceanstatebusinessexpo.com), November 16th is the Businesses Give Back Toys for Tots event (businessesgiveback.com), and November 28th is the Small Business Saturday event (sbsshopri.com). All will be excellent networking opportunities!

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