

Secrets of an Extreme Networker

By Joe Meissner

Everything I've achieved in my business life, including the creation of two highly successful businesses, can be attributed to effective networking. The first business was an outplacement firm that I started from scratch when I moved to San Francisco from Texas in the early '80s. I knew no one on the West Coast, but within a few years, my firm was contracting with major companies in Northern California and nationally, outplacing up to 3,000 executives a year.



The second business is my current venture, Executive Capital Partners (www.executivecapitalpartners.com), in which I represent superstar CEOs and partner them with private equity groups to buy and build companies. An essential ingredient in both of my businesses was (and is) knowing influential people. Executive Capital Partners has been built through relationships that I have developed networking in professional associations of private equity investment groups and other deal makers nationwide.

Both of my firms have been market leaders in their industries. One of the key strategies in building these businesses has been *extreme networking*...particularly at professional gatherings where I could meet large numbers of people in a short time. It's never too late to learn how to network effectively as long as you follow the basic tenets.

Key Questions About Networking



Why is networking is so important? You've spent your whole life earning an education, learning a profession and doing a great job. Most people think that potential new employers will recognize you for your abilities and potential. You probably think that credentials, smarts and technical skills will carry you throughout your career, so what else could you need?

I have an M.B.A. and 40+ years of real world business experience, and both have been valuable.

But career success is not only defined by the *stuff* you know, but also, WHO you know and WHO knows you. This is what I call building *relationship equity*.

The reason that superstar executives, like ones I represent, are so well regarded is that they have a following. Everyone in the industry knows them, or wants to know them. How did that happen? Not by being insular and holed up in the executive suite. These execs reached out to others early in their careers, and continue to do it even after they

reach the top. They are visible at all the industry functions and on industry boards. They're successful networkers, and that skill has worked to their advantage.

Consider this chart, which illustrates **the Law of Large Numbers** as it relates to networking:

no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no
no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no
no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no
no	no	maybe	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes	yes	yes	

The same Law of Large Numbers applies in most other parts of life. The team that wins in sports statistically has more shots on goal, more possessions and more time with the ball. Whether you're focused on job hunting, sports, investments, business development or dating, a lot of good things happen in life if you just keep showing up. The trick is to create lots of exposures, show tenacity; pound, pound, pound and never give up. This is one of the universal truths in life.

How many network meetings have you attended lately? If not many, what are your excuses? Networking can make a big difference in your career, yet surprisingly few people network on a regular basis. When I was in the outplacement business, I asked my outplaced candidates why they didn't attend more networking meetings, and here is what I usually heard:



Thirteen lousy excuses for not attending networking meetings:

- 1. Not interested in the topics or speakers
- 2. Don't like banquet food.
- 3. Don't like socializing with the kind of people who belong to such an organization.
- 4. Don't like going to (night, luncheon, weekend, breakfast) meetings.
- 5. Don't like crowded, noisy rooms.

- 6. Commuting is too difficult.
- 7. Don't like meeting strangers.
- 8. Don't know where the meetings are.
- 9. Don't like going alone.
- 10. Embarrassed about my unemployment.
- 11. Too busy to attend meetings.
- 12. Costs too much.
- 13. Not a joiner.

None of the above are valid excuses. If you really want to advance your career, find a new job or build a business, you will put up with lousy food, people you don't like, crowded rooms and dull topics. You are not going to networking meetings to hear the speaker anyway! Sacrifice a night in front of the computer or TV, or go to bed earlier so that you can get up for a breakfast meeting. Organize your work and your time so that you can attend meetings regularly, and invest a few bucks and your time in your career.

Select the Right Meetings



The definition of a good networking meeting is: *Will the right kinds of people who you need to meet be there?* A "networking event" is any event where key contacts can be made, regardless of what the event may be called. Professional associations, vendor shows, social events, parties, receptions, fund raisers, church, school and civic meetings all apply.

People tend to think of networking only as attending a professional meeting or convention, scheduling informational interviews at coffee shops during a job search. You need to realize that you are networking everywhere...all the time. You can network during any mundane daily activity - waiting in line at Starbucks; peddling at the gym; attending your kids' soccer game; at a non-profit board meeting; at your book club; or on an airplane. You should view networking as an everyday activity in life, just like walking and breathing.

You may wonder how to find local and national networking meetings. There are many sources for this information. Check weekly business calendars in local papers and business journals. Ask recruiters and people in your targeted industry or profession what professional association meetings they attend (and ask them if you can come as their

guests). Research trade and professional associations online. A few good places to start include:

www.ipl.org/div/aon

- Link to trade and professional organizations

http://dir.yahoo.com/Business_and_Economy/Organizations/Professional/

- Professional associations

http://dir.yahoo.com/Business_and_Economy/Organizations/Trade_Associations/

- Trade Associations

www.businessfinance.com/trade-associationslist.asp?type=browse&category=Government

- Government trade associations

If you're a generation or two younger than me, you might be asking yourself: "Why is this old Boomer Coot telling me that I need to go to professional meetings and stuff? Hasn't he heard about social networking? I'll bet he can't even turn on the computer! I can network 24/7 and meet all the people I'll ever need to meet in chat rooms, on *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *LinkedIn* and other sites."

*Dude...*as a matter of fact, I spend 60 to 70 hours a week online and on the phone, and ten additional hours a week on average in face-to-face meetings. When I'm traveling or attending local conferences, I reverse that ratio. Online social networking sites are great, but can you do it all online? Think of a carpenter. He can't build the house with just a hammer, he also needs a saw and a drill gun and other tools. And more importantly, he has to go out and get clients.



Know Your Objectives

Prepare yourself mentally ahead of time before attending a networking meeting by knowing your objectives. These could include:

- 1. To uncover potential job search or business leads.
- 2. To learn something about your profession, industry, marketplace or competition.
- 3. To spread your reputation and conduct personal PR.
- 4. To meet people who could help you (press, headhunters and influential execs).

These are all valid business networking objectives. If you're looking for a date or just to socialize, go to a party, a club or mixer that is organized for that purpose. Don't waste your time and reputation or the time of others by trying pick up dates at business meetings. Treat networking events as lead gathering opportunities, and less so as educational or social affairs. Your primary goal is to meet people who can help further your career.

To get the most from networking meetings, follow these guidelines:



Always arrive early, before the official business or speakers start.

Get your badge and put it on immediately.

If badges are laid out on a table, read them to find out who'll to be attending.

Target key people you want to meet and ask friends to introduce you to them during the meeting.

If it is a stand-up affair and finger food is being served, eat early or late but not during the prime networking hour.

You don't want to mess with balancing plates and chewing food while you're trying to talk

with people and exchange business cards. If you're starved, scarf your food down before others arrive, or wait until the presentation starts and eat while the speaker is talking and you can't.

Move around constantly.

Don't stand in a corner waiting for someone to come up to you. Cruise around early in the event and read name tags. Stake out key prospects who you want to meet.

Use a bird dog.

If your spouse or colleagues are at the meeting with you, send them out "hunting." Give them instructions on the people or type of people you want to meet and ask them to bring these people to you (or you to them) when they spot these important contacts.

Don't stand around or sit with your spouse, co-workers and other people you already know.

Talking with people you already know wastes valuable time. You have only a small window at these affairs to meet new contacts. Also, when you gather with friends, it creates barriers to others who would otherwise approach you. Be polite but brief with friends and associates who try to grab on to you. Tell them that you are there to meet new people and that they should introduce you to others who you want to meet. In turn, you do the same for them and make it a tag team event!

Carry plenty of business cards in an easy place to reach.

I usually carry my cards in my lower left suit jacket pocket so that I can make a "quick draw" when I want to hand out a card. Unskilled networkers either don't have cards (or pretend they don't), or they have to dig into their wallets or purses to "see if I have one." Never go to one of these events without business cards and never leave a prospect without getting their card. If a person doesn't have one, write down the person's name, title and company on a pad that you keep in your pocket and look them up on Google or LinkedIn later. If you're unemployed and job hunting, you should have some simple business cards made.

Types of People to Meet

The people that you'll typically meet at a networking event include key prospects and executive decision makers, vendors of products or professional services, spouses of attendees, and "miscellaneous seemingly remote nobodies." The rule is to never sell anyone short -- you never know who may be a key contact. I've gotten important leads from "seemingly remote nobodies." Real estate and financial services sales people, who are always present at networking events, may not be the people you want to meet, but they probably know someone you need to know.



Be polite and listen to them, then offer them a morsel. "I'm not in the real estate market now, John, but I might know a business associate who will be looking for office space in the future. Could I take one of your cards?" If you do that, John will respond by listening to what you need and probably will offer to help you.

Make eye contact and stay interested in what every person is telling you. Never let your eyes wander, even if you're bored with their pitch. Everyone deserves your attention for at least a couple of minutes. Don't be one of those rude networkers who dismisses a person 10 seconds after they find out that you aren't an immediate hit for them. Their eyes wander all over the room while you're trying to talk to them. As soon as I get rid of these jerks, I drop their cards in the nearest ash tray, face up!

How to Approach People

The easiest people to approach at a networking event are those standing alone. Simply catch their eye, smile, stick out your hand and introduce yourself. Read their name tag and say... "Hi Jack, I'm Joe Meissner of Executive Capital Partners." And he'll say, "Hi Joe, Jack Smith, ABC Corporation." And you'll say, "ABC Corporation? What is ABC Corp.?" or "What do you do at ABC?"



Another way to start a conversation is to do so without introducing yourself. Walk up to someone and say something like, "Boy, this is a really good turnout tonight, isn't it!" or "Best egg rolls I've ever eaten!" or "You know, I was just talking to Fred over there about..."

Acting like a "host" is also a good networking tactic. Go around the room introducing people - even people you have just met to people you don't know. Others appreciate this and will reciprocate in kind. This tactic loosens you up, helps you gain confidence and maximizes your visibility throughout the room.

You may wonder at what point in any conversation should you offer your business card? How do you ask the other person for his?

This usually happens naturally, after each person has given his or her "pitch." One or the other of you will ask, "Do you have a business card?" Most people will give it easily. If they don't, offer a reason why they may benefit from giving it to you: "I know a number of headhunters who place CFOs, and they would love to know about you. Do you have a card?"

When you're deciding how long to talk to each person you meet, you have to make a quick judgment on whether the person you're speaking with is worth the investment of more of your time at the expense of meeting others. Every networking event is a fleeting window. You have to choose between meeting many people or getting in-depth with just a few. I generally harvest as many cards as I can, knowing that I will develop relationships in follow-up calls and emails, some with invitations to have breakfast, lunch or coffee.

Getting out of a conversation with someone so that you can move on is easy. At a break in the conversation, politely smile, raise your voice a bit, stick out your hand for a handshake and say, "Nice to meet you, Joe!" He'll say, "Nice to meet you," and then you can walk off.

Acting like a "host" is another good way to cut off a networking interaction. Simply grab the next person who comes by and introduce him or her to the person with whom you are talking: "Bob, meet Betty. Betty does graphics, Bob does printing." Then you can slip away.

Wedging Your Way into Groups

All networking sessions have groups of three to five people who cluster together around the room. In some cases, these are people from the same organization who clutch together out of insecurity, (doing all the wrong things by hanging around people they already know). Other times they are people who have just met, so you shouldn't be intimidated. Wedging your way into groups really isn't hard. Sometimes you have to "stalk" the group for a minute or two to make this work, even circling the herd a time or two. Watch for one person's eye to wander. Catch that person's eye, stick out your hand, introduce yourself, "Hi, I'm Joe Meissner," and shake her hand. She will introduce herself and then introduce you to the others. If she doesn't, other members will acknowledge you and introduce themselves. It's really just as easy as I just described. I call this the "Cutting Horse" technique, named after highly skilled horses that "cut" calves out of herd.



Here are a few more rules of thumb when networking during workshops and seminars:

- Avoid sitting at all costs. An immobile networker is dead. When you sit, you're stuck with the people sitting next to you and few if any people will come up to you.
- When you attend professional meetings that have seminars and programs, don't get sequestered in a breakout room longer than you have to. Remember, you aren't there to hear the speakers.
- When networking in the reception area starts to break up and people are heading for the breakout rooms, go to the rooms as well, but don't sit down. Stay on your feet inside or just outside the room as long as possible, working the room.

- After most of the people are seated, pick your spot strategically next to as many potential contacts as possible. Introduce yourself to your left, your right and behind you. If you know someone in a row in front of you, tap them on the shoulder and get them to turn around. That will cause people sitting next to them to turn around, too, and you can be introduced.
- Your networking will stop dead once the session begins, so if you can leave without having to climb over people, escape before the speaker starts. A good way to do this is to "notice" someone at the back of the room and excuse yourself to go greet him or her. Then slip out the door.
- The reception hall, exhibits and common areas will become active again 20 to 30 minutes prior to the next workshop. If you can meet even one person while the workshops are in session, you've accomplished your goal.
- There are some good reasons not to skip out of every workshop. You might want to stay in a session if the speaker or the person you are sitting near is a particularly hot prospect. But then you can always come back and catch that person when the workshop is over.
- If you stay during the presentation, listen to the speaker and plan a question that will bring notice to you when you ask it. I usually precede my questions by introducing myself and telling what I do. I try to ask controversial questions or make outrageous or funny statements that will cause everyone to laugh, take notice or come up to me after the meeting and say, "I agree with you" or "That was an interesting point you made."

Networking in the Exhibit Hall



At meetings that offer exhibits, be sure to visit the booths. Be interested, or at least pretend to be interested in what they're selling, and let the reps know that you're a potential or future decision maker for their products. If you've used their products or services before, tell them. At the appropriate time, say that you're in the job market or are building a business and would appreciate any help. Give them a chance to offer leads by telling them exactly what you want from them.

If the rep's company is one that you might like to work for or land as a customer, ask for the name of the rep's manager or other senior officers. If these people are attending the show, ask when they will be in the booth and if the rep will introduce you. Another important strategy is to get invited to their evening hospitality suites. That's where you can catch decision makers in a more relaxed networking mood.

When meals are served, there are several tactics for maximizing your time. When you first enter a banquet hall, linger for a while and let a seating pattern develop. Avoid sitting at tables with other job seekers, students or vendors unless they are prospects for you. As tables start to fill up but still have a couple of seats, make a quick survey. Target a table with the most executive-level decision makers. You'll know them because they're usually well dressed, sometimes older, and paired up in small clusters concentrating intently upon each other while trying to avoid letting you catch their eye.

When you sit at a table, introduce yourself to the people left and right of you, then sequentially to others around the table. If there is someone way across the large banquet table who you want to meet but you can't catch their eye, start a conversation with a person sitting near that individual. By projecting your voice, the person you are targeting will usually be brought into the conversation.

Try not to get stuck in the same table or same chair for the whole meal. Go to the restroom before the speaker starts. When you return, sit in another chair at your table or, still better, at another table. You can accomplish this by "noticing" someone at another table and excusing yourself to go greet them. Be sure that you make this move before the dinner speaker starts. Once the presentation begins, your networking is over until after the program.

The Primary Rule of Extreme Networkers

Never leave a networking event early. In fact, stay to the bitter end...and then some. I generally make my best contacts late in the event, many times after it's officially over. It's always quieter at this time and easier to make good conversation. The lingerers are usually the most engaging people who are also there to meet people. Usually the officers of the organization and the speaker are still around.

Stretch your networking down the elevator and into the street. There's no reason to stop meeting people once you leave the banquet hall. The easiest way to do this is to make some comment about the meeting to the person standing next to you in the elevator or on the way out to the parking lot. Make notes about all of the people you met on their business cards. The next morning, follow-up with phone calls and emails.



If you're just getting started at this or are unskilled at networking, this advice may sound a little too "out there." But these tips work, however their effectiveness depends on your finesse when using them. If you sincerely want to meet people, and if you show people

respect while talking with them, no one is offended. Networking, done properly, isn't a take-take-take relationship. It should be done in the spirit of helping others by building relationships. Remember that besides trying to achieve your own objectives, you're offering others solutions to their needs.

--Joe Meissner is Managing Director of Executive Capital Partners, an executive agency that partners superstar CEOs with private equity groups.

(www.executivecapitalpartners.com)

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