



Catch the Networking Fire

by Margie Yohn

Many years ago, when I was a fledgling business, a wise mentor advised that I join every group and organization I could and network, network, network. This seemed like good advice as it was also in line with my current mantra, "marketing without money." Like many things in life, such as riding a bike or eating a cream-filled donut without wearing it, I quickly learned that networking is generally not easy the first time out. I had a few mishaps. Mispronounced my own name, tripped over a chair and almost fell, felt like everyone could see me sweat, and exhibited the classic "deer in the headlights" look every time I had to talk, etc. At this point, you may be wondering, "How did you get past all this and become good at networking?" Truthfully, for some folks it may be easier than for others. I fell into the latter category...I was not a natural born networker. I had to do some work to get where I am today and I'm willing to share my agony and ecstasy.

1. Believe in yourself, your product or service and be passionate about what you do. Some days I had to fake it because I wasn't feeling particularly passionate. The neat thing is no one needs to know that you're faking. You have to be excited in order to get someone else excited in you.
2. Join Toastmasters to hone your speaking skills, I did. It was a great experience for me because I spoke on topics I cared about in a comfortable setting with people who cared about my speaking success. It helped build my confidence to speak in front of a group of strangers.
3. Put together a quick and easy elevator speech. Write it down and practice it until it rolls off your tongue. That's important because I can't tell you how many times I've gotten up to speak, said my piece, sat down and thought, "What did I just say?"
4. Go to meetings, even of groups you might have no interest in joining. Every group I went to asked that I introduce myself. It was great practice, I always met interesting people and expanded my contact base.
5. Bag the groups you don't feel comfortable with. At one meeting, the chairperson took an instant dislike to me because we were in the same business. She proceeded to make me feel very unwelcome. I never returned. Guess what? My business is thriving without her or her group.
6. Relax, be yourself, and go to functions intent on nothing more than meeting some interesting people and finding out all you can about them. If you go with the notion of "doing business," you'll turn folks off. You know it's true because you've had it happen. You're sitting down to dinner and the phone rings. It's a salesperson saying they're not on a sales call...but, you know they want something from you or why did they call?
7. Toughen up and refuse to take things personally. When someone is rude to you, immediately let it slide off and move on. That doesn't mean you should forget that behavior (see #5 above), it just means you aren't going to return it or participate in it.
8. Practice makes perfect. Keep working at it and you'll soon be a networking pro.

I've built most of my business on networking...and it's some of the best marketing that no money can buy. You meet people face-to-face, you can determine immediately if they are someone you want to work with, and you can let them do the talking and find out their motivations and needs.

After many years in business, I've reached the point where I have to be more discerning of how I spend my time. I still network, however, I reach out and touch people in a variety of ways in order to maximize my marketing time and dollars...but that's a topic for another article.