

Which networks should I join?

BY ROBYN HENDERSON CSP

This question does not have an exact answer. Because... it depends:

1. Which networks are your current clients and prospects attending?
2. Which networks are your peers and competitors attending?
3. What is the best time/day of the week for you to network?
4. Why do you want to attend a networking event?

And if you are not sure of the answer to 1 and 2, go along and find out for yourself—or ask your clients where they go to network. Today a lot of networking is social e.g. golf, sailing, running, book clubs, special interest groups. A well known rain maker for a professional services firm generates all his work from his local sailing club, while another top selling real estate agent generates his leads at the gym. This is a fun way to combine your interests, your networking and business development. However, if you want a more business-like approach to networking, you may feel more comfortable attending a traditional business network.

The time of day best suited for your availability may vary from a breakfast meeting (usually 7.00AM for 7.30AM start) to a business after hours (normally 6.00PM–8.00PM) It's important to find the network that suits YOU and also to be very clear on why you are attending in the first place.

Is it because:

- a. Your competitors are there (a great reason for you to attend)?
- b. Your boss sent you (clarify with your boss the history of this network and your organisation) and its relevance to you. Recently I heard of a non-rugby person being invited to rugby final and sitting there bored out of their brain—what a waste of a good ticket! Sounds like the client didn't do the research on matching the event with the perfect participant. Believe it or not, in corporate Australia, this happens often.

Try before you buy

My rule of thumb is try before you buy. Attend a network as a non-member before you actually commit to becoming a member. Most good networks will allow you to attend at least once, before encouraging you to join. From experience, I normally attend a new network at least twice before I join. In that way I can feel out of my comfort zone the first time when everything is new and then I know what to expect the second time, which is when I normally decide to join a network or not; and just attend future events as a non-member and play a slightly higher ticket price. If ever I feel pressured into joining a network, that is normally a sign that this network is NOT for me. No one likes to be sold to.

Networks like Business Network International (BNI) encourage people to be invited by a member before attending. Originating in the States with founder Ivan Misner, BNI is a fast growing international business referral network group that normally meets for breakfast (although there is a smattering of lunch groups sprouting up Australia wide). The ethos is simple: Givers Gain! All members are encouraged to show up every week for their chapter meeting and bring one or more referrals for members of the group. The value of the referrals is then tracked and monitored. (www.bni.com.au) Plus there is only one person representing a profession e.g. one mortgage broker, one plumber etc.



Which networks are right for you will often depend on which networks your current clients and prospects go to?

Are they industry specific e.g. MEA—Meeting Events Australia (www.mea.org.au) a great network for organizations and individuals working within the Meetings Event Management area. This might be the network for you if you have a product or service relevant to hotels, sound equipment suppliers, event specialist, professional conference organizers, speakers, party hire—basically ANYTHING to do with the meetings industry.

Alternately Associations Forum (www.associations.net.au) is the perfect network for Executive Officers and Chief Executive Officers of the Not For Profit sectors. They hold a combination of regular training programs, networking event, annual summit and convention. All attendees hold senior position in NFP associations, charities, etc; a great opportunity to network with like-minded people, usually quite passionate about their industry sector, but not necessarily motivated by money.

We could fill pages listing the thousands of Australian associations, networks, chamber of commerces, business enterprise centres, special interest groups etc. Trust me, there is no shortage of networking opportunities—if you can't find any ask your clients or associates for help. Remember if your competitors are attending something maybe you should be there too.

Whichever networks you decide to attend stick to the basics:

- Be friendly, act like the host and not the guest
- Ask questions and listen to the answers
- And most of all follow up without being pushy

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