

Networking not nattering

In China 'Guanxi' is an art – the art of building supportive and co-operative relationships – otherwise known as networking.

This Information Sheet looks at seven keys to successful networking that apply whether you are a small events organiser or a major production company.

What is a Network?

A *network* refers to the relationships between people, which create mutual benefit. It is the list of people who have a common interest in your group *and* who know it well enough that you can call on them and they on you.

To *network* is to take deliberate action to maintain and grow your network by establishing a series of contacts for mutual benefit.

Why Network?

Your car could not run if the engine was cut off from the battery, fuel and brake pipes. For your group to work well, it needs to connect well.

Mastering the art of networking allows you to:

- generate awareness about your group's activities;
- avoid clashes, waste and duplication;
- gather feedback on ideas to ensure community involvement and support;
- stay abreast of opportunities and threats;
- pick up on emerging needs and generate creative solutions by combining different people and approaches;
- develop work that needs more than one group behind it to be effective eg campaigns;
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- swap skills and learning so that you always know people who have the skills or knowledge you need to work well;
- widen your sphere of influence.

Seven Keys to Successful Networking

There are seven keys to being a good networker. This briefing looks at how to:

1. Get Ready to Network
2. Plan your Network and Networking
3. Create a Clear Networking Message
4. Develop Personal Networking Skills
5. Record Your Network
6. Follow Through
7. Refresh Your Network

1. Get Ready to Network

Preparation means knowing:

- what your work plans are so that you can decide what skills and knowledge you will need to help you do it well,
- who you already have in your network.

This will allow you to identify gaps between the network you have and the one your group needs so that you can start making plans to fill them.

Remember, networking is *two way* so the people who are in your network are those who:

- share an interest in your work because of what it is, where it is or whom it is with *and in return*
- can give you advice, support or information relevant to your group.

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2. Plan both Network and Networking

Planning your Network means looking at where it is now and setting clear objectives for the future. Take the time to write **Specific, Measurable, Attainable and Time-limited (SMART)** objectives.

For example: To gather information about developing a new youth project we want to add at least 4 people aged under 35 who work in the education and/or youth sector to our network in the next six months.

Planning your networking means working out who you need to make contact with, where you are likely to meet them, and what you want to say when you meet them.

Do Your Research - Put names to the people you want to meet. For example, a quick call to the Youth Arts Department and the receptionist will tell you the name and position of the person in charge. The internet is also a useful resource - it often lists staff along with their contact points and photos. Knowing what someone looks like is a great aid to finding them in a crowded room! Consider where the people you want to meet get together. See 'Exercise Two' for a worked example of how you might go about planning your networking.

Before Attending Events - Ask the organisers whether there is a list of attendees so you'll know in advance who will be there. Make a note of the key people you must introduce yourself to and those you would like to meet if you have the opportunity to. If there are a number of people you want to meet, think about how people from your group might be able to attend to help you out.

Consider whether there might be someone who already knows people there and so can break the ice. A little research into age, background etc will help you decide who is most likely to hit it off with whom.

Be clear about your purpose. Planning is equally important for each individual networking encounter.

What do you want from this exchange – to raise awareness of your group's name? To inform them about your new project? An invitation to arrange a later meeting, or a commitment to act on a previous promise?

3. Create a Clear Networking Message

Having planned what you want to achieve and with whom, have ready an introduction and message that will ensure you get to say what you want and it is remembered. This is often called an 'elevator pitch' – a message ready for use when you meet a key person in a lift and have three floors to explain what you do and get them interested!

You need two things: an introduction to you and an explanation of your group's work that will reveal whether the person has a point of connection with your work.

Say your name at least twice – it takes people until the fourth word to tune in to a new speaker, so they miss who you are first time round. Find a way to make it memorable. You might think it corny, but try it - it works!

I'm Jayne, Jayne Hollywood. That's Jayne with a Y and Hollywood as in the home of movie stars - but I prefer lacemaking!

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When describing what you do, your functionality means more than your position and can be adapted to the interests of the person you are talking to.

Rather than 'I'm the chair of the local drama club' try

- *I specialise in building community pride through drama.*
- *My current passion is improving the quality of life for the young people in your constituency.*
- *I spend my free time building confidence and work skills in young people.*

Have a prepared statement to follow your short and enthusiastic answer about what you do that will guide the conversation into your desired action area eg *"My current pre-occupation is launching a new youth festival to show that young people are not all bad. Do you think that will help people see the good that local youngsters do?"*

Anticipate objections and lack of awareness. A few stunning facts and figures are always good – either in your opening message or as follow up.

"Did you know our panto is the only live art that 60% of people on the estate ever see?"

Prepare a closing remark for each encounter that encapsulates your aim for action with each person i.e.

"It's lovely to find someone genuinely interested in youth. I look forward to hearing your ideas about how we can reach more people over coffee next week. For now, I'll leave you free to talk to others."

4. Develop Personal Networking Skills

You know who you want to meet and you are at the right event. Now you need to ensure you make the right impression.

These are a few basic rules for engaging people - but nothing substitutes for practice (see 'Exercise Three' – Personal Skills).

- Be prepared so you don't waste people's time by trying to network with people who have no connection with your work. Equally, do not let good preparation blinker you to the unexpected. Your contact may have skills to offer you did not know about, so listen and think on your feet.
- Give as well as take and treat all as equals. Your aim is to *exchange* support and ideas, not to drain your 'target' of everything they can give.
- Don't leave your contact wondering how they might help. Get action there and then or make a date to call or meet. This lets your contact know that you are serious about wanting to work with them.
- Always be ready to 'sell'. If you want a petition signed, bring it with you. If you want to sell tickets, have them there and a means to accept credit (few people have money on them at events). If you want people to attend an event, have a personalised invitation ready. Do not refer people to a website or give them a flyer – they'll forget. If at all possible, get the action you need taken or at least securely arranged before you say goodbye.
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- Exchange vital information. Here's a handy hint: if you have a business card, keep it in your right pocket. Put those you collect in your left - like 'in' and 'out' trays. Only exchange details if there is a match in your interests. No match. No card! Present your card with both hands and pride, maintaining eye contact. Accept theirs with one hand and pause to read it.
- Be courteous and 'good mouth' others. Good manners and a happy demeanour work wonders. A long list of complaints about your own work or others wins few friends.
- Circulate at events. Everyone there will be networking so once you have connected and agreed action, move on to meet someone else and allow your new contact to do likewise.

5. Record Your Network

After any event where you've met people, debrief as a team, or by yourself if you were there alone. Write down all the names and addresses, make notes about what they were interested in, how many children they have, favourite colour – anything that will help you reconnect with the person next time. Remembering personal details is the difference between meeting acquaintances and adding friends to your network.

Ideally, record everything in a database. A table in Word, Excel or Access means you will have all the addresses, numbers and names ready for future use. Failing that, use a basic A to Z file putting in everyone on their own card by surname and a separate event sheet, listing everyone you met at each event.

6. Follow Through

Networking only works if you follow up. Go through your debrief list and note down the actions you agreed with people and decide what to do with other contacts where action was not agreed.

Follow through in a timely and appropriate manner. Make contact within 24 hours. Call or send a hand written note thanking them for their interest and confirming the action agreed – *"I look forward to seeing you at 2pm on Wednesday"*

"Thank you for agreeing to advertise in our programme. I have the booking form you completed last night and will call to see if you need anything more than the copy deadlines I gave you yesterday"

Be persistent and make repeat calls until you reach the person. If, however, after four calls you still cannot get through, write a note saying you tried to call, ask them to call, and then let it sit. Make an action note to try to network with the person again to find out why nothing happened.

7. Refresh your Network

Repeat 'Exercise One' once a year. Check through your database to make sure it is up to date every six months. People change jobs, phone numbers and homes.

Keep in touch to refresh the connections that you have made:

- Invite contacts to events.
- Send them a newsletter or annual report, but do not swamp them with irrelevant paper.
- Put them on your Christmas card list.

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Make 'Hello' calls. If you think of someone you know, call them, just to say they'd come to mind and you wondered how they are and what's new with them.

Barriers and Challenges

Time away from other activities

Networking time needs to be planned in but it should not cause you to neglect your core work.

- Set attainable targets. Even if time is tight you could aim to attend, say, three events and add ten people to your network a year.
- Spread the load. Volunteers, committee members, participants and staff can all network for the group. Invest a day training your team and setting up a debrief and report back system and your networking power is instantly multiplied.

Fear of losing independence or focus

Networking finds people with shared interests. Often people see this as 'competition'. Start from the basis of valuing the work others are doing. Be clear about your own goals and keep the needs of you participants foremost and you will find ways to work together for mutual benefit rather than ways to benefit at the cost of others.

Fear of rejection

If the person you want to meet is of relevance to you, then you, by definition, are of relevance to them. When preparing, make sure to spend as much time thinking about what you can offer them as on what they can give you. If you are sure that you do have mutual interests but you don't get a positive reaction it may simply be that you have caught them at a bad time.

Tips for smoothing the path of conversation.

- Have a selection of introductory questions ready.
- Be honest, open and complimentary, people will respond kindly. You have unique knowledge of the work you and your group does. People will be interested if you clearly enjoy sharing your expertise and enthusiasm with them.
- Exit gracefully. After agreeing action, say thank you and that you'll leave them to meet more people. If you can introduce them to a third party before you leave, do so. If there are no points of interest, move on: "I shall leave you free to find people who can be of help to you more than I can and shall bring anyone over if I find them". Ways to leave include refreshing your drink, going to the loo, spotting a friend.
- If you need support to get going, try networking in pairs, but make sure you don't spend all your time talking to one another!

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Further Information

There is a huge variety of resources on the subject from building a networked organisation to networking for career advancement and more. This small sample gives further information on general principles and skills building:

- www.ezinearticles.com/?cat=Business:Networking - This includes an expanding range of short 'how-to' articles from 'Conversation Starters and Techniques' to 'Helping Others to Help You'. Though many of the articles have a business focus, general principles apply.
- **Personal Networking: How to Make Your Connections Count.** Mick Cope, Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2002. ISBN: 0273663593

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