

Business bootcamp #3: the smart art of networking

Want to start a business? The internet is full of advice for entrepreneurs, whether that's detailing the lifecycle of a startup, how to raise investment, how to manifest success and which 'meal in a can' is best for those on the go. Here is part 3 of 10 in your business's 10-day bootcamp.

You've validated your idea and your business plan is taking shape... Your inner circle is beginning to believe you when you say you're starting a business. Isn't it about time you put yourself out there? But wait! Before you dust off your dancing shoes (that is, business/casual loafers), read on to get Oprah-levels of networking prowess.

Oli Barrett MBE, who runs the course 'build a better network' and who's been described by *Wired UK* as 'a consummate connector' says that building a strong address book makes it easier to make things happen, 'because you have a trusted group of people who are happy to hear from you. That can save days, weeks or even months.'

'The other advantage of having a great network is

that you'll become an opportunity magnet.'

It's often those early opportunities that define a business's future successes: from serendipitous advice, to audience exposure and investor introductions, it all helps turn the dial for your business.

Oli says that the key to effective networking is 10% about meeting interesting new people, and 90% about keeping in touch with interesting people you've already met. 'Most people approach it the other way round.'

Don't only rely on having chemistry with the people you meet. For effective networking, Oli says, you need to cultivate techniques for staying in touch.

'That could be a regular hosted gathering, taking time to share your latest thinking, or being in touch with people when something important happens in their life. On a practical note, it's carrying a personal card alongside a business card, and taking the time to say hello to someone at the edges of an interesting gathering.

'Those corridor conversations have led to some of my most valuable and enjoyable opportunities.'

'Most of all, I'd encourage anyone to approach networking with an attitude of curiosity and helpfulness. Curiosity means asking open questions and not being too keen to find out someone's job title when you first meet. Helpfulness can happen in that first meeting, by making useful suggestions, but it really comes into its own in the longer term. Keep people in your mind, and when you spot something potentially interesting for them, drop them a line.'

Deborah Ashley, The LinkedIn BlackBelt and founder and trainer at Level Up Executive Branding agrees it's about offering value to your network. She adds that before you plan the *How?* of networking, it's helpful to understand the *Who?* and the *Why?*

'You need to determine what sort of networking you want to do. Are you looking for strategic partners? Are you looking to engage decision-makers? Are you looking to meet people who share your interests?... What do you hope will

come out of this experience? Maybe it's finding out about new opportunities to grow your business. Whatever your goal might be, make sure that it's realistic and achievable to ensure success.

'Networking is a marathon, not a race, so focus on similar goals or interests. If you can find those connections, you can start building relationships that are mutually beneficial.'

Whilst online networking can be effective, she says it's not the same as connecting in person.

'I use LinkedIn as a way to connect with other professionals who work in similar industries and who share similar interests. I've had the pleasure of meeting some amazing people, but it's hard to get a sense of who someone is without meeting them face-to-face.'

Richard Kilgariff, founder of Bookomi, connecting authors to audiences in companies and at members' clubs, agrees. 'It's better to have 150 powerful relationships than 15,000 LinkedIn followers.'

He admits that online networks absolutely do help maintain those face-to-face relationships, and they're doubly useful as a tool through which you can showcase your expertise.

Even if connecting online is your best next strategic step, don't over-rely on socials, though. Oli's had successes with good ol' cold emails. In fact, he says most of his ventures and projects have started that way.

'The trick is to take long shots, keep them brief and personal, and time them to coincide with something happening in the life of the recipient rather than in your own life.'

What are the big blunders when it comes to networking? We've all met someone that mistakes being selfish for being assertive. One example of this brashness, Richard says, is barrelling in and saying 'I'm looking to broaden my network.' Cool, nice to meet you, can I hold your coat, too?

Deborah adds, 'Not taking the time to connect with someone who has offered their help,' alongside asking for too much at once from your contacts, when you do eventually ask.

Whether you're confident or nervously taking these steps to meet people, be sure you don't monopolise their time: don't be *that* person that people work to avoid.

In fact, Richard says, 'One counter-intuitive piece of sales advice the author Dan Pink offered at one of our events that stuck with me is to always give

someone an off ramp.'

'In business terms, that means allowing new relationships time to breathe - and if they don't work out, it's not personal. Move on.'

Useful links:

How to network on LinkedIn (expand.io)

FOMO is the missing ingredient in your investment strategy (Maddyness)

Start a business networking group (Meetup)

How to network: 17 tips for shy people (CIO)

Keep an eye out for our next topic, #4 of our 10-day bootcamp: getting the legal side of things right from the start. Don't worry, we've sourced an expert witness to show you step-by-step how it's done, your Honour.

(Sick of these cliched segues and want to read the programme, from start-to-finish, right away? Do so [*here*](#).)

Ella Bowman has a career spanning PR, public affairs and business consulting. Happiest helping progressive companies deliver the right message to improve audience behaviours, she currently splits her time between freelance copywriting and as a strategist for Safety In Design, Ltd.

Read also

[The ten commandments for launching a startup](#)

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