Networking: Beyond the Buzz Word

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By Doug Swanson

Networking has become the business cliché of the '90s. Go to any Chamber of Commerce mixer, any service club appreciation dinner, or any meeting of business executives and you’ll see lots of big shot managers strutting around the room telling people how well they network.

Unfortunately, all of this bragging amounts to a lot of hot air and not much business at the bottom line. That’s because many managers who claim to be excellent networkers are more interested in the way they appear to their professional colleagues than they are in building their business by helping customers.

It’s easy to “network” with the big shots. But networking with the people who really count -- your day-in, day-out customers -- is much more difficult. It is, however, the only networking that counts.

So how should you go about networking “beyond the buzz word?”

First . . .

Stick your neck out! Regularly, do something to help someone else, regardless of whether or not your business makes money as a result. Too many managers have a little built-in cash register in their minds and, unless they anticipate getting an immediate financial return, they won’t take a risk for a customer.

This kind of behavior may be fiscally responsible, but it won’t help your business get a good reputation for service in your community. You’re a manager -- you know what you can and cannot afford to do -- so go on, get involved! Look for ways to use your business’s resources and information to help other people fulfill their personal and professional goals.

So often we get so entrenched in our daily routine that we forget that we’re in business to help other people. Every resource your business has and all the information you use should be dedicated to helping people succeed.

Second . . .

Make some referrals! Get to know at least two dozen other business managers in your community. Get a good understanding of what products and services they provide, and make sure they know what your business does. A critical component of networking is working with these other businesses to get customers the products and services that one firm alone cannot provide.

When you have a good working relationship with other merchants in your community, you’ll get business referred to you from other people -- and you’ll reciprocate to keep that relationship intact.

Third . . .

Join the club! There’s a lot to be said for membership in professional and/or civic organizations as long as that membership comes with a commitment to work to help others. The membership rosters of non-profit “service” organizations are filled with names of people who provide no real service . . . they belong in name only for the community recognition they derive from membership.

I’m a firm believer that today’s active manager needs to belong to a couple of community-oriented service groups and needs to stay active in those groups to help with the work they do.

Such active membership is personally and professionally rewarding, and it gives your business the opportunity to gain recognition through you for service to the community.

Fourth . . .

Name names! When you’re introduced to people, do you remember who they are? I’ll admit, I’m one of the worst with
names, so I have to make a conscious effort to remember people's names when I meet them. If I make the effort to remember a person's name and something about what that person and his/her business does, I'm better equipped to help them out at a future date.

It takes effort, but it's worth it. People are really flattered when you call them by name after having only met them once, and it makes a strong impression for you and business you work for.

Fifth . . .

Speak up for yourself! When people ask you what you do, what do you say? When I answer this question I could say:

"I'm Doug Swanson, and I'm a public relations consultant."

Or, I could say:

"I'm Doug Swanson. I'm an educator and public relations consultant. I also write articles about building your business through effective management and marketing."

In the first instance, about all you learn from me is my name and the fact that I do public relations work. Chances are, within a minute or two after meeting me, you'd forget both of those facts.

In the second instance, however, not only do you learn my name and occupation, but you learn something from me that could trigger a conversation focusing on a management or marketing problem you may be having.

The second response gives me the opportunity to tell you more about what I do and suggest that what I know might benefit you or your business. Said with enthusiasm, it's a great ice breaker for Doug Swanson and a great introduction for a conversation about effective management and marketing techniques.

Sixth . . .

Spread the word! When you are talking with people, do you let people know what kinds of problems you can solve so they can refer valuable information or potential customers to you? After all, isn't this what networking is all about — letting people know what you can do for them and then offering them a chance to let you know when you can do it?

So many people who identify themselves as “networkers” have nothing to show for it but a card file filled with names and phone numbers. As far as I'm concerned, though, networking doesn't do you any good at all unless you assert yourself to let people know what you can do to help them!

Seventh . . .

Follow up! Networking only works when you continue to use it, faithfully, month after month and year after year. And it doesn't take a whole lot of time, either. Just set aside:

- two meetings (business/social opportunities) each month to meet new people
- five minutes a day for making phone calls to follow up on past networking contacts.

Just schedule a few minutes a month to meet new people, and then a phone call or two every day to ask people how things are going and whether there's any way your business can help out. That's all it takes. You'll be surprised how much you gain from it.

In the end, your success is really no secret. No matter what line of work your business is involved in, your business success is built on helping other people. If you go to work every day with the drive to help others, the courage to stick your neck out, and the resolution to continue in the face of all uncertainties — you're networking beyond the buzz word! ☑

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Vice-president of The Swanson Group, a research, marketing and PR firm, Swanson got an early start in water conditioning working in his father's North Hollywood, CA franchise. He was later general manager of a Rayne dealership.