

Welcome to the first in our two-part series on networking for the [SBDC National Blog](#).

Networking gets a bad rap. When mentioned, many people cringe at the idea of mingling with peers and other relevant stakeholders over drinks and hors d'oeuvres all the while pursuing future profits. One of our researchers recently envisioned networking as a collection of decision makers gathered in an extravagant library, dressed in top hats and black tie attire, proposing fortuitous under-the-table deals while puffing their Cuban cigars and toasting their decade's old scotch. The entire scenario may exude an egocentric and impersonal affair, as everyone seems to be out for his or her own personal interests, but the good news is that you have been networking your whole life, and you probably didn't even realize it.

Contrary to popular belief, networking isn't about money, but rather relationships. We don't mean introducing yourself to a stranger, engaging in small talk, exchanging business cards and then never following up with an email or phone call. We're talking about creating and maintaining lasting, authentic connections which is beneficial to both parties. We all have networks, which consists of the people we know, the people that they know and so on. Growing your network is about increasing the circle of people you know, and being a positive influence in that relationship. A professional connection consists of giving and taking, and those wishing only to take from this relationship are the foundation of the bad reputation that networking receives. However, a properly functioning network can help your business grow, and here are some examples of how.

Networking Gets Your Name Out There & Increases Opportunities

The obvious benefit of networking starts with increasing your visibility in the business community. As entrepreneurs, you are your best marketing tool and very few people can represent your business as well as you can. Getting out and networking gets your name out there, lets people know that you exist and gives you the opportunity to share your unique story. One of the challenges in generating new business is informing your customers that you exist and are ready to provide them with a product or service that they need. Networking builds your reputation, so be careful on how you present yourself, as well.

The more people you know, and who know of you, greatly increases the chances for opportunities to come your way. Events are great places to generate new leads or find referrals. Congregating with like-minded individuals, who want to further their business successes as well, means that opportunities are yours for the taking. Being active can lead to making the right connection, or meeting someone who can make the connection for you. These connections can lead to great opportunities in the future.

Networking Leads to an Exchange of Information

Networking events are full of well-established professionals in your industry, and part of the appeal is sharing each other's experiences and valuable information. In a world where information is readily available, timing becomes even more important and the edge comes when you garner crucial insights. Hearing important information or trends from the horse's mouth can give your business a tremendous competitive advantage.

Networking Opens Doors to New Resources

Just as you can generate new leads and opportunities, so can others. Finding new vendors, business partners or even employees is highly likely. Networking is where like-minded people gather in a space to expand their access, so you will be meeting people who can help you grow as well.

So get your [business cards](#) and [elevator pitches](#) ready. Make sure to [dress to impress](#), and be ready to contribute as much as you take from the relationships that you create in the future.

Speaking of Resources...

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