

mX Suits

Networking expert Julia Palmer (left) works the room for contacts with Robert Albert, Xavier Shea and Teejay Little. Picture: BRITTA CAMPION



Work it, baby

Once considered a "dirty" word, networking is now recognised as a vital skill for professionals, as **KARINA DUNGER** reports.

It was only after attending her umpteenth work-related event that Julia Palmer realised she had the skills set for a new career – teaching others the finesse of building relationships with contacts. Or in a word, networking.

Now a networking trainer, Palmer says the art is undergoing a revival, as people realise the strengths of face-to-face interaction.

"A couple of years ago I would have said it was more of a dirty word – it's definitely revived," she said.

Palmer, managing director of BConsulted, says she has seen every type of attempt to network.

And she is adamant that networking is a skill which can be learnt or refined at any age, regardless of natural ability or confidence.

"A CEO's pay packet is determined by the relationships they make. It's how you get job advancement and other opportunities," Palmer said.

"We work with a lot of young people and graduates and find they're a lot more open to learning how to (network). They realise it's something they're going to need in their career.

"It's critically important for young people to develop a wide network – if they can go up to their CEO at the Christmas party and introduce themselves, that's a vital step they've taken in their career."

NETWORKING NO NOS Palmer reveals the top six networking mistakes – and how to fix them:

✗ "I'm so busy that I go from event to event unprepared, just to see where it takes me."

Treat networking in the same regard as a business meeting – have conversation starters ready to ensure a smooth start and to help with nerve and stress levels. I tell people to read *mX* for conversation ideas.

✗ "I'm a natural at networking; I don't need training or advice."

Just because you're a good small talker, it doesn't make you good at networking. It's more sophisticated, and in order to succeed, it takes work.

✗ "I get nervous and talk too much."

This is a common mistake which can have a negative effect on people's image. Just as bad is a networker who doesn't talk at all. Be aware of your verbal and non-verbal actions as well as those of others. What you do and say will determine your success.

The best way to avoid a bad case of verbal diarrhea is to allow an even flow of conversation by asking open-ended questions to make sure you're not the only one in the conversation talking.

✗ "I try and meet as many people as I can and give business cards to as many people as possible."

This is not the best approach. It's simply not time effective. It's more beneficial to speak with fewer, high quality contacts. Prioritise high quality contacts, take the time to meet people and introduce yourself – look them in the eye and above all, make sure your handshake is firm to avoid the dreaded cold fish.

✗ "I launch into what I do for a living right after I introduce myself."

Don't get down to business immediately. A key skill to effective networking is effective listening. You know you're there to market yourself, but if you truly want to set yourself apart, listen more.

✗ "I never follow up once I've met someone."

About 70 per cent of people I've surveyed don't bother calling the person they've taken the time to get to know at events. If you don't take time to do this, you won't be able to make valid assessment of whether they are a valuable contact. The follow-up call saves you time and targets the right events and people. The main advice is to ensure you follow up promptly and fulfil any promises made.

■ For free networking articles or to sign up for networking workshops, visit www.bconsulted.com.au