Quality contacts

It's not the size of your business network that counts, it's who's in it. By Ann-Maree Moody.

So you find yourself here again. Another networking function where attendees talk only to their companions and everyone collects business cards as if it's a competition to see who leaves with the biggest pile.

You wonder why you've paid $50 to drink cheap wine and listen to a claque of speakers. But next week you'll be attending yet another function and coming away with yet another pocketful of business cards that are useless to your career goals.

Goals. It's time to wake up: you're stuck in a Groundhog Day of your own making.

It's time to change the social norms for this mindless, repetitive habit of attending functions without any purpose or strategy. The most popular site for professional networking, LinkedIn, encourages members to connect regularly with new people. And Facebook is built on the idea that the more "friends" you have, the more "popular" you are. Leap into the real world and it's easy to think you're going to be overwhelmed by having lots of "friends". But size shouldn't be your only concern, especially where business contacts are concerned.

"If you ask people where they are networking and with whom they are networking, in most cases you'll find that they haven't aligned the activity with either their career plan or their organisational goals," says a networking strategist and chief executive of the Business Networking Academy, Julia Palmer.

"Therefore people attend networking functions without knowing who to talk to, or even why they're there. Our statistics show that 75 per cent of people that say they exist still don't support the results they need." Yet it's commonly said that most new jobs and business opportunities have been gained through your network. So maybe it's time to test that premise and work out why your network isn't working for you.

'Showing up to an event isn't enough anymore.' Julia Palmer, network strategist, isn't working for you. And that requires work. "That's why it's called 'networking' not 'necessitating," Palmer says.

The first step is to define your purpose. Do you want to win a promotion with your current employer? Do you want to find a job in the same industry but with a different company? Do you want to create a niche for a product or service in your business?

Once your goals are defined, the next step is to devise a strategy and align your networking activities with that plan. Start with the people already in your network who can introduce you to your target audience. Compile a list of decision-makers you don't know but who are the sort of industry you'd like to know and who you would like to know them. Then devise a strategy to meet them.

"Showing up to an event isn't enough anymore," Palmer says. "You need to join committees and be part of industry groups; you need to be at the table where discussions and decisions are being made about your industry or profession. It's about developing your visibility and credibility and making sure that you're promoting yourself to the right people." Getting noticed by decision-makers who are much more senior means moving in the same circles. The old advice about joining the same golf club still applies but if you don't know your sand wedge from a six iron, don't despair.

"These senior people attend functions and events all the time and often they are the speaker," Palmer says. "And a little-known fact is that no one talks to the speaker before they present - plenty of people line up after their presentation but not beforehand. So you have a real opportunity for face-to-face, uninterupted networking by finding out where they're going to be."

Making the connection, building the relationship and maintaining it requires time, so don't expect results immediately. Keep refreshing your network to ensure it aligns with your current and future goals. Call people, especially if they're wasting your time and energy, just like in the online world, "unfriending" someone takes no effort at all. Relationships flourish with attention and they falter if they're neglected.

"Making connections through social networking can be part of your strategy but, in order to deepen that connection, you have to meet people face-to-face," Palmer says. "Relationships with people who can help you meet your career or organisational goals require more effort than sending an invitation via LinkedIn. Unless you can answer the question: 'How will this person help me, or help you? You're always going to have the same people in your network.'"

During this annual spring cleaning of who you know and why, examine the professional associations and groups to which you belong. If you're not getting any benefit from your annual fees or from the people you meet at events, move on. There are plenty of groups you can join that will better suit your business and professional goals.

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