

Getting out there and finding new clients

The musts and must nots of networking,
presenting and attending sales events

Kim Mason
SALES & MARKETING

Fear not! I am about to suggest that you get out there and start attending networking events, exhibitions and other sales events (if you're not already).

But the thing is, I'm going to show you how to do it in a way that is a) painless (yes really), b) helpful – no selling or cringing with awkward embarrassment, just helping and c) super effective – by which I mean of course, that it will help you connect with potential clients, rather than waste your time!

In short, in this guide, I'm going to take the dread out of networking and sales events. And just as you get comfortable, I'm going to round off with a nice little case study example of one way to get prospects rushing (well maybe not quite rushing but with a steady gait) to you.

Sound like utopia? Well it probably is, but it's also perfectly doable. So, dust off your business cards, warm up your voice and read on.

Networking for the less confident: be people curious

A lovely client of mine runs a speech and language consultancy in Hampshire. She trains organisations to improve children's literacy, language and communications skills.

This is her positive and funny experience of some informal networking and how it led to a business referral. I thought I would share this for those of you who are less than confident about networking, wondering about how to start and whether it will work for you.

Client to me, on networking: *"Go to a book launch because the wife of the man launching his book has offered to take your kids to Scouts and said she would meet you there. Go over to random woman looking lonely. Ask her if she knows anyone there. Find out she is the CEO of a very well respected organisation in Southampton which has some funding for interventions for language and literacy. Note to self: must remember to take leaflets when dropping kids off at Scouts."*

So, no one knows where it will start or lead, and it doesn't matter, because the point is they've met – and each of them now knows what the other one does, when they didn't before. Ta da!

So, where to start in networking to grow your business?

I've noticed that for smaller businesses and business owners, the idea of networking typically creates a strong and polarised response.

You may be someone who imagines a room full of people who all know each other – well, everyone except you that is – and you quake at the thought of having to go up and introduce yourself.

You dread the question, "So, what do you do?", knowing that you might not be able to easily or clearly articulate exactly what you do. You worry that will prevent any new contacts you do succeed in making from remembering you, or prevent you taking the conversation any further.

You may feel some, or even all, of these things:

- That you haven't got the skills to network, you're not a sales person
- You won't be able to walk up to a stranger to say hello
- Everyone else will know each other
- You won't fit in to the group – they will be more interesting / qualified / senior / corporate / knowledgeable / connected than you (delete as appropriate)
- You won't have enough interesting things to say
- People won't want to hear about you and what you do
- That you'll be left in the corner alone and will have to get your phone out (**Sanity note:** even the most confident and experienced networkers sometimes lose their energy or confidence – especially if you're not enjoying the event overall – and do this. It's absolutely fine, and a good chance to catch up on your emails.)

Some people simply can't get enough of networking

You might be one of those people that loves it. All those events where people are all keen to meet each other! People from different walks of life, different industries and backgrounds, different ages and stages of work – all interested in meeting new people and making new contacts! Yay!

Not you? Then read on...

Remember: you're definitely not there to sell

You must understand that you're not there to sell. You do not have to persuade anyone about anything.

You're simply there to meet new people, and in doing so, it's handy to let them know – in an easy to remember way – how it is you help people or businesses in your line of work. You ask a lot of questions about the other person's life, work and situation. You don't talk very much.

Be genuinely interested in what the other person has to say, actively listen and don't plan your next response or statement. Offer to put them in contact with a great accountant /osteopath / career coach when you find out they need one – and they're really grateful for the reference.

You are the one people want to talk to – and they will remember you. You'll find out about common hobbies or interests; values or ideals you share; shared locations or contacts in and outside that room.

It's about meeting people that you wouldn't meet otherwise

And when you leave, you'll have had some interesting conversations with interesting people – and some dull ones with others – and you might even have shared the odd business card, agreed to Link In, meet up or keep in touch with someone. They or someone they know may one day be a prospect...

If you haven't, you don't worry. You check your diary for the next event, and look forward to the interesting people you just might come across there. You are a great networker, and you never even realised it.

Be people curious – more tips for those less confident or starting out in networking

1. **First go to anything simple and small.** anything that could even roughly be classed as networking – like my client's book launch above. You're the actual customer in this scenario, which is a very soft and gentle way to start speaking to others – you can simply say hi to people and ask them whether they are planning on buying the book. The conversation has started. (This is networking by the way – also known as a chat with anyone you don't know).
2. **Then be people curious.** Listen more than you talk. Find out all about what they do. Ask lots of relevant questions. Be genuinely interested. Ask about

how they promote their business, what they love – and don't love – about what they do.

3. **Be ready to say what YOU do very clearly and simply.** Be specific about who you really can help and what value you add. This is the hardest part for a lot of people and businesses, and something I help many of my clients with as a starting point. You can find lots of online resources to help with this with a quick Google. People will always ask, and you want to be confident, concise and clear, so they can remember you easily.
4. **And yes, get some business cards!** Moo.com is always a pleasure to deal with. Maybe not the cheapest, but quick, easy and high quality. Don't go about thrusting them on people – you may be surprised how many people do – but as soon as you're sharing work stories, you can offer to swap.
5. **Learn from others.** When you're having a lovely conversation with someone – work or otherwise – take a mental note of that person's body language, what you're talking about, who's listening and have a think about why it's so pleasurable.

Then use what you learn. Liked it when someone smiley asks how long you've been coming to this networking group because you're so relaxed? Try it yourself next time as a conversation opener. Bit bored by someone going on about themselves without much pause for a two-way conversation? Then don't do it yourself. Love it when someone admires the passion you have when you talk about your business? Try giving that compliment back to the next person you meet.

All in all, networking is just about meeting those people you wouldn't meet otherwise. And remember, other people are there for the same reasons as you and lots of them – even the super-confident looking ones – have either been nervous when they started out, or still are but hide it!

Always be people curious, have fun and let me know how you get on. Feel free to share any good networking stories – positive or disastrous – here with me, so others can learn from your experiences too.

The WORST things you can do at sales events (and the best)

Not long ago I received a cry for help from a friend who hated the sales events and conferences he had to go to as part of his business development role. He was told to attend by his MD... *'in order to network, meet people and drum up some new business'*.

Here's what he had to say about sales events:

'You wander around with a fixed smile on your face. You go up to different stands to say a friendly hello only to be stuck with the sales guy determined to sell you their CRM software despite the fact you're a competitor (they never ask what you do).

You sit down for the keynote speech to find busy-looking blokes glued to their phones with their laptop bags on the seat next to them to avoid having to talk to anyone.

Over coffee you chat to – finally! – someone who recognises you from last year, only to have them dragged straight off by their MD to go and 'network'.

At lunch you're squeezed onto a table of four women from the same company who are having a training day – clearly keenest to learn from each other.

After an hour catching up on your own emails (might as well), you get to the wrap up speech at 3.15pm to find that 75% of the delegates have gone home and even the big exhibitors have started noisily packing up.'

Sound at all familiar to you?

Does the thought of going to another industry event to *'drum up some new business'* fill you with any sense of weariness, sore feet or dread? If it does, then read on to find out easy ways to make going to events a really worthwhile – and even enjoyable – part of your sales and new business plan.

1. Picking the biggest conferences in your industry with everyone (who is anyone) attending and lots of famous keynote speakers.

This sounds good on the surface, but stop and have a think.

Famous speakers are all well and good for training and motivational purposes, but are you there to learn or to grow your wider network? Famous speakers and big brand customers are in such demand you're unlikely to get a chance to have any meaningful conversations with them.

Biggest conference? That should ring alarm bells. Lots and lots of people you don't know yet – and may never see again. Seniors schmoozing big clients and juniors there

to learn. Lots of people from all the different sectors and sub-sectors in your industry.

Ask yourself how many of your specific target audience are going, or how many existing customers? Even if they are, if it's a big event, how on earth will you find them if they haven't got a stand?

2. Now imagine going to a small, niche event where everyone cares about the same things that you do

- Where most of the people attending have similar problems to solve.
- Where you are very well positioned to help these businesses out.
- Where there are many quiet moments that allow for longer, deeper conversations without interruption.
- Where people want to chat about relevant work stuff with interested folk because that's what they are there to do.
- Where they introduce you to someone else at the next door stand because you are part of a tight-knit group of people who cross paths regularly.

Does that sound any more appealing?

3. Plan to meet as many people as you possibly can

Aim to get as many business cards from people as possible, and give them your card at the same time. After all – it's a sales funnel and you need plenty of new prospects in at the top to convert in the future.

Hmmm. Which would you prefer? 100 random names acquired for your CRM or one new relationship started with a senior decision maker in a business that's a good fit with yours, whose problems you already know you can solve?

If your aim is to gather names for CRMs, then go get 100. But if you're in the business of acquiring new clients for longer term relationships, see if you can find one who would appreciate your help.

4. Don't find out who's going in advance

Ignore the delegate list from last year's event – after all, it's probably going to be different people this year anyway. Right?

Wrong! Just because you can just turn up on the day and see who's there when you get

handed the bump on sign-up does not mean anything.

Imagine running through last year's list of attendees and rating them against a qualification criteria for your own target audience to see how many would be a good fit for you.

You'd soon find out what percentage of businesses are even a vaguely likely prospect – which has got to be useful for deciding whether to attend and then, if you do go, who to speak to first, and next, etc.

5. Don't do your homework

There's so many people going, it would be a massive waste of time to start researching all of them. Correct. If you're going to huge industry conferences, that is (see above).

But if you've carefully chosen a small, niche event with a high percentage of likely prospects..

Making a RAG list (red, amber, green) of attendees means you can head straight for the green ones (your best fit prospects) to strike up conversations first. It means when you bump into people over the coffee urn – the one that never pours properly even when you've lined up the arrows – you can steal a swift glance at their name badge and (try to) remember their RAG status.

Red? Say hello, be very nice and introduce them to someone else near you to talk to.

Knowing who you want to speak to – in advance of getting there – also means you can do your homework about those businesses before you meet them:

- Know their general offer, size, sectors, locations.
- Check out their website, social media profiles, content marketing activity and news feed.
- See if you are (even loosely) connected to anyone there – and make a note.
- Take your list with you, with your notes and look at it throughout the day

Because when you **do** bump into a great prospect, there is nothing better than being able to have a slightly more meaningful conversation than – “Ah, so what *does* IBM do?”

6. SELL or help?

Whenever you strike up a conversation or turn up at a stand, don't let them get a word

in edge-ways and sell, SELL, SELL!

Well, it's either that or introduce yourself with a smile and ask them some truly interested questions about their business that might lead to them sharing relevant problems where you could point them in the direction of: useful resources, good contacts, other relevant networks they might benefit from or even advice.

It comes back to being people curious.

And if you do find yourself switching unhelpfully into sell mode, remind yourself of just how you can attract new clients by helping them and giving things away for free.

7. TRANSMIT, or listen?

And if the conversation turns to you and what you do, you can explain that briefly. If they do start looking bored, you can try asking them some interested questions about how the show is working for them this year.

Is it the first time they've been and have they found it worthwhile? Did they go to the Birmingham one in April and if so, how did they find that in comparison? Have they seen Ys stand – it's got a wonderful interactive video that's worth a look if they have a mo...

They'll probably appreciate and remember you as a kind, helpful person who it might be nice to stay in touch with.

8. Explain all those little ins and outs about what your company does

Is your aim to make sure they know exactly what you do?

Because you could go through and list all the different products and services (x 15) that you offer, and then list all the different benefits (x 6) of each. Just so they are completely clear about all of those. And of course, keep repeating your company or brand names throughout your talk (so that it sinks in).

Or, you could explain yourself simply. If you're well positioned, you can do that at the same time as making it clear exactly what value you bring to businesses that are really very similar to them.

When they hear that, they just might be curious to know a bit more about the hows and whys of what you do.

9. Talk too much about yourself

I think you've get the message.

10. Don't follow up afterwards

It's busy after an event. So many business cards to put into your CRM – or your drawer, depending on where you're at with new business processes.

A management meeting or two. Vital, unmissable or pointless, depending on the quality of the management.

Two proposals to write, 68 emails to respond to, customer invoicing to get done, three overdue calls to make.

But what is the first thing you should do? In fact, the one and only thing you should ever do to make sure that the event has any value for you whatsoever?

Do whatever it is that you said you would, to anyone you met at the conference.

1. Offered to put them in contact with a useful person in their sector? Connect them.
2. Said you'd forward them a link to that brilliant article? Send it.
3. Talked about setting up a meeting to find out more about each other? Call them with dates.

Everything else can wait.

A case study - How getting speaking slots worked for one SME

There was once a small B2B consultancy firm in Hampshire.

For them, prospects – just like buses – would fail to materialise when they really needed them. And then – as soon as they were busy – prospects would magically appear in threes, all wanting help at the same time.

What this firm *had* was too much feast or famine. What they *wanted* was rather more three meals a day. So this consultancy hired someone to help them build a steadier pipeline.

A single, focused marketing channel can be powerful for an SME. As a small business, they didn't need a big, integrated marketing or new business plan. It can be much more

targeted than that. They already had their house in order. They knew what they did. They could articulate it. They had a niche of sorts.

Besides which, they'd already tried many different marketing tactics and channels – with varying results, but never good enough to justify continuing. So, they knew what they wanted.

They wanted to focus their energy on getting speaking slots as experts in their own area.

As truly independent experts who could help SMEs select and implement the right business critical software system for them. Speaking slots – or workshops, or clinics – where they could stand up and give really useful, practical and valuable advice to businesses for whom they'd be a good fit.

How to get those elusive speaking slots at the right events

Well first, this lovely person they hired did a good deep dig around all the relevant events. Now, at this stage, it's just simple stuff that needs doing. Her clients could easily have done it without her. (I mean me. And don't tell them that it was simple stuff).

But, to be fair, they would have had to *wait* till they'd finished a client project before starting that research. Because their work is typically quite intensive and doesn't allow them time to market themselves until they have a gap.

Therein lies the problem. You have to put in the grunt work to find the right events

Here's some of the practical, simple stuff I did. So you can do it too.

- Researched all the events I could possibly find.
- Asked everyone I talked to in that world, about other events they knew about.
- Got to know (to some degree) all the events.
- Made many different contacts in trying to find the right contact.
- Put in the time to develop personal relationships with those contacts.
- Reviewed lots of exhibitor lists (previous years'), visitor profiles (pinch of salt required), conference agenda and speaker profiles.
- Visited events to suss them out.

- Sent my clients to visit events to suss them out.

Getting a speaking slot isn't as hard as you might think.

I also came to understand a whole bunch of interesting stuff which you might find useful too.

- The wider landscape of events in their industry and connected supply chain.
- The different chances of getting a speaking slot at particular regional or national event – from 0 to 99%.
- That some events actually (and sometimes desperately) needed speakers and so were actively looking for content and were really pleased to make contact with me.
- The huge breadth and variance of negotiating opportunities within the whole networking, visiting, exhibiting or speaking at events world.
- Which events had hot, noisy, scruffy little stages with wobbly chairs for visitors – and which did it properly with working microphones and air conditioning.
- Early stage events (i.e. events in their first year of existence) are often the best place to go. Support them when they're starting out and the relationship could develop very productively.
- Which events would always want you to pay to speak (nah...), and which would value good content enough to pay you (yay!).

Your relationships with event providers are what matters.

As the events schedule and the elusive speaking slots began to materialise, a whole bunch of other stuff became clear:

- Some events would openly innovate to co-create content, and some couldn't conceive of the idea of giving anyone a speaking slot who wasn't an exhibitor/sponsor etc.
- That government-supported events in particular could vary enormously in their ability to actually organise their own event.
- How and why smaller, niche-focused (often, at first appearance, a bit amateur

and scruffy) events could have a much better outcome than the big, fancy (often very smart and hi-tech) conferences.

- The quality of an event's website could be inversely proportional to the quality of the event. I was most surprised – and a bit discombobulated – at this: having believed in the past that if someone really wouldn't invest in a decent website nowadays, they couldn't possibly offer a decent service. That showed me!
- Co-speaking – case studies with clients, comparisons with competitors or joint workshops with suppliers – is loved by event organisers. So you can leverage that.
- The relationship you develop with an event organiser becomes everything. It's about trust.

Prepare for the prospects you might get.

As time passed, we came to learn some other things.

- The prospects that are appearing are a much better fit than the prospects obtained through the broader referrals and networking-based marketing they had been using. Yay! No real surprise there, but always good to know.
- My client's service is very much in demand. We now need to take a good look at how – as a small business – we manage multiple prospects with different requirements. Not to mention keeping in touch with those early stage enquiries. And possibly collaborating with competitors with similar values for overflow work.

Over to you now

Getting out there is really not as hard or as hideous as you may have thought.

In fact, with the right approach, it's a great way to meet valuable prospects and genuinely interesting people. Just saying hello and showing an interest can lead to a useful connection.

And if you're one of life's public speakers, finding the right stage, could potentially take your business to the next level. So, what are you waiting for...get to it.

Kim Mason

07827 297569

kim.mason@allthingsnewbiz.co.uk

allthingsnewbiz.co.uk

I help determined SMEs acquire the right new clients