

First Contact – How to be a Visitor

As a first time visitor you do not know what to expect at a Networking Group. The strange thing is, it is hard to write a description of what happens in a meeting even though every group follows similar agendas, every person's perception is different and everyone gets different things from the meeting.



What I want to give you is an idea of what you can expect to happen during the meeting, to give you a guide to what is going on around you. There is no way that my writing the words 'don't be nervous' are going to stop you feeling so. Everyone gets nervous, it is natural when placed in an unfamiliar situation where you don't know what is going to happen, and you are going to meet new people.

All I can say is visiting a Networking Group is not an ordeal by fire. It is an organisation filled with likeminded business professionals who come together to help and support each other. One thing to remember is even the most experienced networker in the room was a first-time visitor once, and knows exactly how you feel.

To prepare you should write a brief introduction to your company as you will get a chance to speak. Ensure you have at least 50 business cards with you, and wash behind your ears. No I am not joking, personal hygiene is essential to make a good impression. It is not a good idea to eat strongly scented food the night before. We had a recent experience of a visitor who must have had a very strongly garlic flavoured meal the night before. He did not make a good impression with breath that could strip paint, not good when you are trying to have a conversation with someone.

Get a good night's sleep and make sure you know where the meeting is to be held. Everyone gets a little nervous and during your first meeting you will want to soak up as much information as you can. Last and by no means least, take a pen, paper, some money to pay the meeting fees and the company cheque book. The cheque book is so you can put in your application at the end of the meeting. Most Networking Groups only allow one member per profession and although there is a joining process, the sooner you start, the sooner you lock out potential competitors.

Part 1 - Open Networking

As you walk into the venue you will be greeted by the members of the group. Their role is to welcome you, make you feel at ease, and then introduce you to one of the members to start 'networking'.

The 'Open Networking' part of the meeting happens for the first 20 minutes before the formal meeting starts. It is designed to allow you to mingle, meet various people, introduce yourself, and learn what other members of the Chapter do. Take 50 business cards and remember to wash behind your ears...

As a visitor, you will become the centre of attention and one of the ways your mind compensates for being nervous is to sometimes talk too much. It is natural. You need to try to keep this in check and remember to ask questions, as well as answer them. Remember you are at the group to see if it is going to enhance your business, so be mercenary about it.

Conversely, the group members and Leadership Team will be looking at you in exactly the same way thinking, 'what will this person bring to our group to make it better'.

So, with the 'Is this a good organisation?' question in mind, you need to try to speak to about five people in the open networking session. Ask them some questions. Do not ask them if they enjoy the group – it is quarter to seven in the morning, if they didn't enjoy it they would not be there!

Remember time is limited, use it carefully. Far better to ask if they get much new business from their membership, how long they have been a member, if they are going to renew their membership, and obviously, ask them about their business.



Example opening questions:

- Do you get much new business from the group?
- What is the best way to find referrals for you?
- How long have you been a member of this Chapter?
- Has your Chapter had a (insert your occupation) as a member before?

Although you will be nervous about your first visit you should not forget you are there for a reason. Maintain focus and do not be tempted to fall into conversations about sport or politics. Sometimes this is hard, but if you find yourself stuck in such a discussion, wait for the appropriate moment and ask the group you are in how long the Chapter has been in operation, or if they have a printer in the group. This should stop the sport talk and lead the conversation in a different way. You need to keep focused on the matter at hand.

Another way to escape a pointless conversation is to sip your drink, pull a face and make an excuse about needing more sugar. This gives you a legitimate reason for leaving without offending the person who is talking. Whilst at the sugar bowl you can strike up a conversation with a new person or group.

Part 2 – The 'Sit-down Stand-up Meeting'

Once you sit down for the formal meeting, your active participation ends for a good hour as you sit and listen to the members give their presentations. During this time you need to listen to the wants and needs of the membership and make any notes you feel you need to. Also look



around the room at the dynamics of the meeting. You need to see if people are focused, chatting or listening.

Remember you are here to check out if you want to join this group to enhance your business.

After the members have completed their presentations you will be introduced and have a chance to speak. One of two things happen at this point. Either you will be so overcome by nerves you will stand up, mumble your name and company, say how good you think the meeting is, and sit down in a matter of seconds or, you will stand up and overpowered by nervous energy launch into a long and boring sales pitch which will run over the allowed time, resulting in you being “belled” and having to sit down before finishing all the important things you wanted to say.

All I can say is ‘Don’t Panic’. There is a third way, and that is to prepare, breathe and relax. Listed below are the five things you need to say:

1. State your name and company
2. State in one sentence what your company does
3. Say how long you have been in business
4. Say where you operate
5. Restate your name and company

If you just deliver the five points above in a clear confident way, you will make a good impression and stand the chance of being remembered.

For example:

Good morning, my name is Tony Allwood (1) and I run W3 Website Angels (1). We are a website design (2) and marketing Company that provide a wide range of services to small businesses in the Waikato (4). Based in Hamilton , we do have customers all over New Zealand. W3 has been trading for fourteen years (3), and has over 800 live websites. So, if you want to know how your business can use the web to make more money, then please call me, Tony Allwood of W3 Website Angels (5).

Keep it short and sweet, and make sure you speak with confidence. As well as trying to promote yourself, you are being looked at by the Leadership Team with a view to your potential membership, so you need to make a strong impression.

Part 3 - Referrals

After the ten minute speaker comes the section in which members give the referrals they have found or give fellow members ‘Raps’ (short for appreciation). My suggestion is even if you have a genuine need for the goods or services of members of the group that you do not give them a referral.

That sounds like twisted logic but here is the reason. If you just stand and say you are interested in talking further and follow this up with a meeting and/or phone call to actually arrange to do business, you will create a good reputation for doing things properly. At the next meeting, once the business is done or at least started, you can pass out a formal referral. You will also get a Rap from the member(s) you are now doing business with for the work you are placing with them. Do it right from day one and you will not look back. You should also thank the person who invited you and give your honest impressions of the meeting and your feelings about it. If you intend returning for a second visit say so, and then people will know you are genuinely interested in the Chapter.

Part 4 - Post Meeting Activity

Once the meeting is closed you have the chance to discuss joining. Remember to get an application form and don't be afraid to ask questions about how much membership costs etc.

As you leave the venue you will probably feel both tired and elated at the same time. Your first time at a Networking Group is an experience. Do not be surprised if you wind up doing more work and having a more positive aspect about the world for the rest of the day. By 4 pm you will probably be very tired.

When you have made your decision to join, do not waste time, call the Vice President and tell them you wish to apply. Get the form filled in and delivered to them ASAP. You never know who else is applying who may prevent you from joining. Your first visit to the group will give you a new insight into ways of developing your business. If you are considering joining do so, do not be left outside by procrastinating.

