

Women In Business  
**Networking Is a Skill You Can Learn**

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Entrepreneurs often don't realize the immense power of personal and professional networks. Consider that your network consists of everyone you know, even those viewed primarily as acquaintances. Networking is one of the most effective tools a small business owner can use to increase visibility and generate referrals. Networking has become one of my favorite activities. The network I've developed continues to reward me in significant and unanticipated ways. A year ago, while serving as the president of a local networking group, BNI, I set a personal goal to become a "Master Networker". I'm pleased to report that I'm well on my way.

Many people feel awkward in their attempts to make business connections with strangers. They sometimes abandon their efforts, saying, "I'm just not good at networking!" It's helpful to stop expecting networking to be comfortable. Most of us will never be completely comfortable, and that's perfectly fine. Be encouraged; networking is a skill you can build. Be prepared to give yourself a pep talk and then "just do it".

Women tend to be more relational and are particularly skilled in connecting with others. This advantage stems partly from our long traditions as gatherers, mothers and caretakers. Observe the interactions at a women's business networking event; it is amazing how quickly people connect and the depth of conversations that occur. The other phenomenon I've experienced and observed countless times is that women thrive when they feel connected to others. It especially decreases the sense of isolation that can arise as a result of working alone. An unexpected benefit of my network is that I have developed some wonderful friendships and now have a circle of people I consider colleagues in my entrepreneurial endeavors.

Approach networking by listening for ways to naturally contribute to the interests of others. This will not necessarily pertain to your business services. Ask people about what they do, and then be prepared to listen well. If you develop a sense of natural curiosity and appreciation, you may find it surprisingly easy. Most of the time, you will discover that you share something. Usually people reciprocate and ask about you. Be prepared with an approximately 60-second description of what you do, preferably focusing on one service or product. Follow up with a concise example of the positive results of what you've described. Conclude by telling them specifically the type of client you hope to attract to your business. Be prepared to offer your business card. A good tip is to write the event and date that you meet someone on the back of their business card. Nothing is more frustrating in networking circles than to make a strong connection with someone, yet be unable to follow up with them because you've either forgotten their name or don't have their contact information.

As you expand your network, make sure to nurture your existing circle of contacts. This is particularly important with people who are natural referral sources. Position yourself as

a resource to others. Repeated contacts help strengthen the relationship and increase the occurrence of referrals. For instance, I have a nutritionist in my network. We mutually nurture our networking relationship by sending appropriate referrals, sharing Internet newspaper articles and exchanging occasional recipes.

The best way to build and maintain your network is to get out there and use your networking skills. Our community offers numerous networking opportunities, a few of which I'm listing here. The Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce <[www.tompkinschamber.org](http://www.tompkinschamber.org)> holds monthly "Business After Hours" events. There are usually several hundred people in attendance representing all areas of local business. The Independent Consultants Opportunity Network, ICON <<http://www.iconconnect.org>>, hold a monthly meeting, open to the public that offers an opportunity to network during the first thirty minutes. Ithaca even has its own branch of an international networking franchise, Business Network International <[www.ithacathumbsup.com](http://www.ithacathumbsup.com)>, which holds structured weekly meetings where people network, refine their skills and generate business for one another. Women TIES, a Syracuse-based organization <[www.womenties.com](http://www.womenties.com)> has hosted several Ithaca-area events. Women Working Together is a monthly lunchtime networking group in Cortland that meets the first Friday of every month (for more information email <[grow@cortlandbusiness.com](mailto:grow@cortlandbusiness.com)>). Visit my website <[www.toclimbhigher.com](http://www.toclimbhigher.com)> and select *resources* to discover many more networking resources, tips and tools.

For successful networking, focus on what you can give to others as well as be prepared to effectively convey information about yourself. Remember that networking is a skill you build over time. I look forward to meeting YOU at a future networking event!