Chapter 1

Getting to Grips with Networking Basics

In This Chapter

▶ Deciding why to focus on business networking

▶ Examining where it all started

▶ Understanding what to expect

*I*n this first chapter, I explain why I fell in love with business networking, after a particularly shaky start. I also explain some of the options you have, and what you should expect if you're about to start networking.

Most importantly, I give you a few pointers and belie some of the common myths about networking, as well as plot a course from when the first person decided to go networking to where we are now.

Understanding Business Networking

I would love to be able to tell you where networking started and who it started with. It would be a brilliant start to this book if I were to give dates and historical evidence to support my contention that everyone everywhere needs to network in some way.

Focusing on business networking particularly, I reckon it started when a caveman (I'll call him Og, although the truth is I don't know) was really good at hunting oxen and his

neighbour (who we shall call Ug) was well known locally for being able to make fire. Ug would always help Og make a fire and, in return, Og would give Ug some of his oxen meat; a sort of early barter arrangement.

Ug was one day helping another villager, Ig, to make a fire. Ig made spears and Ug mentioned, most likely by drawing on the wall of the cave, that his mate Og would be really interested in looking at Ig's spears and he would bring him along tomorrow to meet him.

Whether Og, Ug or Ig ever existed and whether there ever was an exchange of spears we shall never know. But I reckon that, when people first started specialising in something, that was when something akin to networking began happening.

Sadly, Og worked out that his best bet was to kill Ig, steal all his spears and keep the oxen meat. It always was a rough neighbourhood!

Tens of thousands of years later, a guy called Stefan walked into his first ever business networking event and therein started a love affair.

This affair began by attacking networking with brute force myself, simply by doing as much of it as I possibly could and forcing myself to find out how to do it better along the way.

But before I learned 'how?', I needed to understand 'why?'.

Starting with 'Why?'

You found out how to walk because you wanted to reach the exciting things that your parents had placed just out of your reach. The exciting things looked so good that the falls and the effort required to hoist yourself up, fall down and hoist yourself up again were worth it. After a few weeks of repeating these moves, you were able to take your first tentative steps. Then, you grabbed the first thing you could reach and put it in your mouth.

You learned to talk so that you could then give your parents feedback on the stuff they were leaving around for you to put in your mouth and ask them to put slightly tastier things within reach.

Around 17 years later, you wanted to travel further afield for more and tastier things, or wished to impress the opposite sex, so you found out how to use a complicated and expensive device (the car!) so that you could move around the country with relative ease.

At every stage, you first had a big reason 'why' you wanted to do something that involved lots of effort to learn how to do properly.

Had the 'why' not been there, had really tasty things been within easy reach, you may never have bothered with any of the above.

Noting the 'why' of networking

Today you have an opportunity to find out how to network, or how to network better.

Now I love networking. I love it enough that it's a huge part of what I do and these days I get an awful lot out of it. But getting it right may take a bit of effort and, like getting good at anything in life, you need to work out why you want to do it, so you can remember that if it ever feels hard.

What's your biggest challenge in business? What's the thing that keeps you awake at night or distracts you while you're trying to work? What would you like to be better at or have more of?

Write it down. Is what you've written down worth a bit of effort? If it is worth some effort, brilliant; if it isn't, then you're not thinking hard enough.

If you wrote down 'sharks', you're just being silly.

Whatever you wrote down (except sharks), you'll be able to solve that challenge or find that thing through business networking.

I reckon you wrote down something like:

 ✔ I've just started a business and don't know what to do next.

 ✔ We don't have enough clients.

 ✔ Our advertising isn't working.

✔ I don't know how to sell what I'm doing.

✔ I'm not confident enough.

✔ I need to start selling before I run out of cash.

✔ I've run out of cash.

✔ I need to know how to do something better.

✔ Nobody understands what I'm selling.

✔ There's too much competition for what I'm doing.

Do any of these resonate with you?

If you get good at business networking, by reading the rest of this book plus practising and refining as you go, you really can find whatever your business needs by building your network around you:

✔ More confidence

✔ More contacts

✔ More sales

Figuring out your 'why'

What is the thing that's going to make you really want to get good at this business and make it work?

Do you really want your business to work? Do you really want to get more out of business networking? Do you really want to answer another rhetorical question?

Go back a step further. Why are you really doing this? What is the thing that gets you up every morning and keeps you working on your business even when the going is tough?

Is it that you want to make a difference? Do you want your kids to have a better life than you did? Perhaps you want to take more holidays or to build up a decent pension?

I can't answer this question for you, but if you run a business, you're going to need to know why you're doing it. That's what gets you out of bed and working; that's what keeps you going when you have to put in the extra work and do the things you need to do, particularly as you're building your business.

Revealing my 'why'

Networking was well and truly out-side of my comfort zone when I first started doing it – spectacularly so.

My 'why' was that I had to make my business work. I had no other way of paying the mortgage or bills. My 'why' was more desperation than anything else because at that point, in 2007, I was standing with my back to the cliff edge. I had nowhere else to go but forward.

I also realised at around that time that I wasn't a salesperson. I was great at a lot of things but I hated cold-calling and going door to door trying to talk to business owners (I tried it. Even in the summer it wasn't fun, so imagine doing it in the rain.)

I latched onto networking with a couple of big 'whys'. I needed to make my business work. And I wanted to do that without selling door to door.

Think about why you want this business to work. Write it down. Refer back to it if you ever question yourself.

Talking to Strangers (Ignore Your Parents' Advice)

One of the issues around networking is that it goes against everything you were told as a child.

I grew up in the 1970s (and will let you know when I stop growing up and become a grown up). Something that I was repeatedly told, by parents, teachers, nuns (Catholic school) and by the Public Information Films on the telly, was that I shouldn't talk to strangers.

Thirty odd years later, and I was walking into a room full of people who I didn't know – all of whom were strangers and all of whom I was expected to talk to!

This talking to strangers filled me with dread for a lot of reasons. Firstly, it went against those teachings from cleverer and bigger people than me when I was little. Secondly, I convinced myself that everyone else in the room was somehow 'better' than me.

I convinced myself that everyone else would have a better business, would be much more confident in what they were doing, probably have a better car and undoubtedly go on better holidays than me. Who was I, just starting out in the self-employed arena, to have anything in common with these giants of the local business world?

I learned a really valuable lesson in those early days, which I have had to learn and re-learn pretty much every day since. If I wanted to be any sort of success, I had to learn to get over myself and my little fears and insecurities. I had to push out of my comfort zone a little bit, then a little bit more, then a little bit more.

I was once told by someone not to think about going out of my comfort zone. Why would I want to do that? My comfort zone is comfortable. I like being comfortable. He taught me to think about going *into* my adventure zone. Instead of thinking that I'm leaving something comfortable, I now think about entering somewhere exciting. My comfort zone broadly involves me sitting at home eating crisps and watching repeats of *Open All Hours*. My adventure zone is akin to getting to go to Alton Towers every day and each time encountering a brand new and more thrilling ride.

No matter what your parents, teachers or kindly nuns taught you, ignore that for a while. If you're going to be any sort of success in business, you *will* need to talk to other people and a business networking environment, where everybody has chosen to be there and nobody has to worry too much about selling straight away, is the friendliest and most effective arena I've found for achieving that.

Knowing Who Uses Networking

People often ask me, 'So, who is going to be there?' or 'What types of businesses will be at the event?'

The truth is, all sorts of businesses use networking and all sorts of people go to networking events.

I've met the entire spectrum of business types and types of business people at networking events, from new start-ups through to owners of big businesses. No type of business is represented every time and not every type of business person is found at every event.

Try thinking about mining when you think about networking. Every type of business with every need and every purchasing requirement can be found here. Think of networking like this: you've established that there's gold here; you just don't know where the biggest nuggets are and where you'll simply dig without finding much.

But when you're mining, you keep digging and that's exactly what I recommend you do with your networking activity. Keep refining your approach by all means; keep finding better and more efficient tools to help you network. But keep digging.

What I sometimes see people do is dig for a while, then give up and go to dig another hole somewhere else, in a different networking group. Somehow they expect that, if they move from networking group to networking group often enough, they'll somehow stumble across a magical group of people waiting to buy from them.

Obviously, I'm a director of a networking organisation, so I have a preference. But find a networking organisation that suits you and stick with it. Find one where you're comfortable with the culture and the value that you can get from the network. Then apply every tool at your disposal to make it work.

Don't ever just focus on the people in the room; always keep in mind that you're also talking to everyone they know.

Think beyond the room. Every connection – every real connection – has value.

Remember, always, that whether your networking efforts work, or not, is ultimately your responsibility.

Rather than looking elsewhere for the 'right' people, have a look at your approach, refine, revisit, measure and make it work.

Thinking beyond the room

I first met Kathy in 2009 when she was a self-employed, sole trader, HR consultant. Kathy and I had a one-to-one and she became a client of mine. I was helping her write the content for her website, blog and email newsletters. Things were going well and Kathy's business was growing. After about six months, however, I got a call to say that Kathy was winding up the business. It turned out that she'd been head-hunted by a large retailer with over 3,500 employees in over 500 outlets. You see, before launching her own business, Kathy had held senior HR positions, up to director-level, at various well-known UK retailers. So I had lost a client, but a friend had got a great job.

About six months after that happened I got another call from Kathy, asking if I could, at short notice, do a presentation to the staff at their new store in Cardiff. Kathy knew that I could handle that, as she'd seen me present at various 4Networking events.

I did that presentation and, for the next year and a half, each month got three or four days' work from the same company. Kathy remained there as HR director for about four years.

The story moves on a little bit. Knowing that I had a large network of small businesses around me, Kathy used me as the 'go to' guy whenever she needed anything. She knew that I would always know someone who I trusted and had a good reputation as a supplier. My contacts saved her a lot of time and meant she didn't have to choose someone with whom she had no connection. In total, nine people from within my network received a referral to work with the organisation: a life coach, a health and safety specialist, a printer and a car leasing company, among others.

So my one-to-one had led to a very decent amount of work for me, plus referrals to other businesses too.

The story doesn't end there. One person had once turned Kathy down for a one-to-one. He didn't 'need' to talk to her when she was a 'little' business, but he got in touch with me as soon as he noticed that she was now with a big company, asking for an introduction.

Never underestimate the other people in the room and never judge your networking based on your perception of them. You never know who someone used to be, who they're connected to now or who they may go on to become in the future.

Realising It's Not All Funny Handshakes and Old Boys Clubs

One of my biggest worries when I first started going to networking events was that I had a stereotype in my head that I couldn't shake. I thought that the room would be full of people with much more business experience than me, all wearing very smart suits, and have the atmosphere of some of the uncomfortable business events I had attended early in my career.

Now, don't get me wrong. Networking events that *do* feel like 'old boys clubs' do exist, and they have a place. For example, you can find events that just welcome men, and events that only welcome women.

But for each of the above, you can also find at least as many networking events that welcome everyone, regardless of business type, business experience, dress code, gender or anything else. Plenty of networking events make everyone feel welcome and confident.

Some people are more comfortable with a strict structure, a defined dress code or only in the company of people of the same sex. But to my mind, every time you're at a networking event with a restriction, you're restricting the number of people you can meet, connect with and potentially do business with.

However, even in this section, I'm stating my opinion and my preference. What is important is that you choose a networking group or organisation that suits you and, throughout this book, I give advice and guidance to help you do so.

Finding Networking Opportunities

A networking opportunity to suit you really does exist, whatever your preference for types of events and format and whether you choose to look locally, regionally or nationally (or even internationally, come to that).

Chapter 4 of this book provides lots of guidance on finding networking opportunities but, in brief, start with recommendations from people you already know in business. If that fails, Google is your friend.

I will say something here, though. If you're starting your networking career, go to as many events as you can and work out what's the best fit for you. Think about:

- ✔ Where do you feel comfortable?
- ✔ What structure works for you?
- ✔ Are you being asked to commit to being there and, if so, is that a realistic commitment for you?

Try before you commit.

Following Networking Guidelines

Any networking group or organisation has certain guidelines, sometimes written and enforced, sometimes unwritten and simply expected.

I'm not a fan of rules anymore. I think that a lot of rules in business were created for a different age and many are no longer relevant. Who decided that people in business should dress in a particular way? And why does dressing a certain way make you more 'professional'? A suit is just a uniform.

One of the many extra benefits of networking is that you get to know other people's rules and decide whether you want to work with them or not. You may decide that it's in the interests of your business to follow some laid-down rules and guidelines, or instead that you went into business to make your own decisions and not follow other people's rules.

What networking can also give you is the confidence to decide such things for yourself. For a long time, I acted in the way I was expected to act and dressed in the way I was expected to dress, purely to suit other people's rules. Once I became confident enough to do things my way, I found that I was more relaxed and, as a direct result, people were more relaxed around me.

What I don't want to do in this chapter is make you worry, if you're about to embark on your first networking experience, that there'll be a load of rules that you have to abide by.

TIP

Turn up and be yourself and make sure that any networking event fits you before you commit to it.

Networking in a Nutshell: Different Formats

Networking involves lots of different formats and structures and I go into them in more detail in Chapter 6. Here, I just give you a flavour of what to expect, particularly if you're thinking of going along for the first time, or attending something different to your usual meeting.

Understanding unstructured networking meetings

You'll find networking meetings, and events listing networking as part of the format, which can best be described as 'unstructured'.

The best way to describe these meetings is that they're in a room full of people and you get to choose whether or not you go up and talk to the others.

Some people really thrive in these kind of meetings, and work the room with ease and panache, talking to everyone they have time for and always exchanging business cards. I deal with open networking like this in Chapter 7.

Bear in mind that if you're invited to an event or dinner that has something else as the main event but lists 'networking' as well, it probably means that there'll be lots of other people in the room. The networking probably doesn't have any structure.

Seeking out structured networking meetings

The type of networking meeting that I'm most familiar with (and personally prefer) is structured. These meetings are where the networking forms part of a proven structure or script.

I like this type of meeting because it forces me to network. In open networking situations, you may be tempted to simply chat to the people you know. In structured networking, the structure typically gives you the opportunity to talk to people you don't know as well.

Networking formats you're likely to encounter

I could write a whole book on the different formats of structured networking groups but will concentrate on the ones I know best and have come across most often.

Speed networking is often a person's first introduction to networking, as it's widely used at trade and business shows, not least because it creates a lot of energy and, undoubtedly, everyone gets to meet a large number of people. Put simply, at speed networking you get a minute to talk to someone, then you move on to the next person; you repeat this process until you've run out of people or the event has reached the end of its time. Speed networking is exhausting, frantic and lots of people enjoy it and collect *lots* of business cards.

Networking over a meal is really common and forms the basis of 4Networking, the organisation of which I'm a director. Typically, you meet with people over breakfast, lunch or dinner and a group leader, chapter director or chair runs the meeting to a script. This script always involves you introducing yourself to the group, as well as spaces for open networking and other parts of the meeting, such as a guest speaker and one-to-one meetings with other attendees. To my mind, the act of sitting and having a meal with others does help to quickly establish relationships and break down boundaries. There's something extremely social about doing that and the social element leads to a relaxed and efficient way of starting to do business.

Some local meetings have large numbers and you're split into tables where most of your actual networking is done with the other people on the same table as you.

TIP

If you're at that sort of meeting, get out of your comfort zone and sit with the people you don't know.

You can read more about this kind of meeting in Chapter 6.

Business networking and referral marketing – same difference?

As well as networking meetings using different structures, you'll also find that different organisations have subtly, but importantly, different aims.

You need to recognise that networking organisations structure themselves and their meetings differently, to ease the exchange of business between members, but in different ways.

Referral marketing is the process of attending networking meetings with the specific intent of generating referrals and leads from other members of the group. These referrals are typically passed on paper slips and generally involve the person giving you the referral having passed on your details to someone else who may need your service. These referrals are, of course, of different levels of value to the receiver. Some of them are simply the name of someone who may be interested, right through to a name and mobile number for someone who's interested, has had your service briefly introduced by the person referring you, and is now eagerly anticipating your call.

TIP

If someone's good enough to pass you a referral, please be good enough to follow it up promptly and feed back to the referrer how you got on. The easiest way to dissuade someone from passing you any more referrals is to forget or not bother to call the people who've been referred to you. A thank you is free, and goes an awfully long way in both business and life.

The purpose of your attendance and introduction at meetings with a referral marketing slant is to continue to educate the other members about your business, so that they know exactly

what you do and who you'd like as a referral. BNI, the largest business networking organisation, has used this approach on a global level.

Business networking, on the other hand, is where you build relationships with the other people in the room, not just with the expectation of winning referrals from them. At business networking events and in business networking organisations, the relationships have value in and of themselves and can lead to business being passed, to joint ventures being formed, to trusted suppliers being found and to businesses being developed often far beyond what the business owner originally expected.

The purpose of your attendance and introduction at business networking meetings is to build and develop your crowd, those people who come to like, know and trust you and with whom you end up doing business or passing business to. 4Networking, I'm proud to say, has a massive network of joined-up business networking groups across the UK and in Australia.

Business networking and referral marketing require lots of the same skills, applied in slightly different ways.

Make referrals whether or not doing so is expected as part of your networking organisation. Be the person who gives. Be the person who others want to know because you're a natural giver. Give without expectation of return.

Take personal responsibility. If you're not getting any referrals, you need to work out why and do something about it. If you're not getting any business from networking, you need to work out why and do something about it. Never blame the other people in the room; they've got their own businesses and their own stuff going on. Refine and refine again until you make your networking efforts work.

You've already been networking without realising it!

Before you decide that networking isn't for you, please read this sidebar. Before you tell me that you're not the sort of person who goes networking, please read this sidebar. Before you decide to sit in your box room and aggressively wait for the phone to ring, please read this sidebar.

You're already networking and telling people about your business. You already have a brief introduction, which you tell people when asked what you do.

At the school gates, at the pub, at the golf club, at the swimming pool, at the gym, at your football or rugby club, at work if you're building your business on the side, on Facebook and wherever else, you talk to people.

You talk to people about what you do and you talk to people about what your partner does as well, so you already know how to introduce other people's businesses too.

You build networks within networks and circles within circles of people who like the same football club, the same rock band, the same reality TV programme. You form alliances with the other parents at pre-school and with the other people who go to the gym at the same time as you.

You know the other people at your church and what they do for a living. You know the other scout leaders and regularly go out for meals with them. You still keep in touch with all the people who were on the same adult education course as you in 2006 and, of course, you still keep in touch with your old school friends on Facebook and know what each of them, and their partner, does for a living.

You network already because that's what humans do. We're interested in what the other guy is up to and want to find out what so and so's husband actually does because 'in computers' doesn't cut it.

Business networking is nothing new, scary or complicated. Business networking is an extension and a refining of what you already do every single day.