

Networking for Business Librarians

Elizabeth Malafi
Coordinator, Miller Business Resource Center
Middle Country Public Library
Centereach, NY

For many, the idea of networking is intimidating. Networking often gets a bad rap. If someone approaches, immediately gives a pitch and tries to push a product or service, he is not networking, he is selling. Networking is building and developing relationships that are mutually beneficial. Benefits of these relationships can include new customers, new jobs, or new partnerships. Too many people think that by networking they will see immediate results; but networking is about making and building connections. In order to network successfully you must be open and willing to meeting new people.

Successful networking takes a lot of practice. Start by meeting or reconnecting with people. Listen to them. By listening to them you learn about what they do, what they are interested in and what they can offer. Once you know this you may be able to make connections for them with other people you know. These connections and referrals usually don't happen right away. You may know someone for years before you have a referral for them. Even if you can't make an immediate connection, be sure to follow-up after a meeting and to keep connecting with them.

So, how do you start? If you are new to networking, starting a conversation can be uncomfortable. It is easier just to stick with people you know. Remember, when attending meetings or programs with a colleague, to successfully network, you must separate and talk with new people. You already know each other; this is the time to make new connections. Your first approach will be most difficult but as you network more and more, it will become easier – almost second nature.

- **Have an introductory line tailored for each event.** It can be something as simple as, “This is my first time here, can you tell me a little about this organization?”
- **Have an elevator speech prepared will help you get conversations started.** An elevator speech is a short description of who you are and what you do. It is called an elevator speech because you should be able to say it in the time it takes an elevator to go from the first floor to the top floor. Your elevator speech should be under a minute and say a lot in a few words. Use your elevator speech to grab the listener's attention and show your enthusiasm for your work. Do not introduce yourself with name, title and company and consider it an elevator speech. Instead, try something like, “I help businesses get free information to help grow their sales.” What businessperson wouldn't be intrigued? Honing the perfect elevator speech will prove to be invaluable to you in your networking endeavors.
- **Become an effective and engaging communicator.** Start by smiling, looking the person in the eye, listening and offering genuine conversations. Remember that non-verbal communication is a big part of how we communicate. If you approach a person with your arms crossed and look past them, they will not be receptive to connecting with you.

- **Take advantage of a captive audience.** Talk to the people in line with you at the registration table or buffet line. Always make conversation with the people sitting next to you. Start with something as simple as Hello.
- **Make notes on the business cards you collect.** At some events you may collect several business cards, but how can you remember who's who when you get to the office the next day? It is helpful to make notes on the cards you collect. This will also help with your follow-up.
- **Follow-up.** So, you've attending a networking event and collected a fistful of business cards. Now what? Don't just collect business cards to be polite. These cards are valuable components of successful networking. These cards will enable you to follow-up. If you collect cards and leave them in your pocket, you are wasting a lot of networking time. Follow-up contact can be made via email, phone or written note and should be made within 24-48 hours of meeting. Follow-up need not be elaborate. It can be as simple as an email expressing pleasure in the meeting or thanking them for any helpful information. Include any information or materials you may have discussed. Providing follow-up may be enough to differentiate you from others at the event and helps build solid relationships. Be sure not to make it a sales pitch.

Business librarians should attend as many networking events and programs as they are able. These are important to your success and the success of your library. Business librarians can use networking to spread the word about the services offered through their libraries. Meeting businesspeople is a good way of hearing about their needs and concerns. This will allow you to keep your collection up-to-date and relevant to your users. Businesspeople can also become champions of your library services and connect you with new businesses or funders.

Networking with other librarians, at conferences and through professional organizations, will help gather information on new services and resources.

Networking at the Library

- Libraries can add networking to almost any program. Advertise a program to begin a half-hour before the actual program start time. That time allows the program attendees to network with each other. . Even something as simple as setting up tables and chairs, instead of just chairs, can help people feel more comfortable networking. Librarians in the crowd can facilitate interaction by helping attendees meet each other. This will also help them hone their own networking skills.
- Libraries can start their own networking group. With the recent economic downturn, many libraries have started Job clubs. These clubs are small groups of people who meet regularly to talk about job searches and careers. The goal is to support the success of all members and to network with others who may be able to help with member's job searches. Take this a step further and start an Entrepreneur's club at the library. This club would give small business owners or potential entrepreneurs a forum to facilitate meeting and the exchange of ideas and contacts.

Over ten years ago, the Miller Business Resource Center started its own networking group. The Library Business Connection (LBC) is a networking group that provides a forum for local businesses to meet, exchange information, share resources, and participate in educational presentations. The program begins at 8am with a light breakfast and networking amongst the attendees. After 45 minutes or so, a speaker discusses a topic relevant to small business owners, such as customer service strategies, time management techniques, marketing, e-commerce and communication skills. Networking continues after a brief Q&A. The LBC has been ideal for networking. We often have groups chatting well after the program has ended.

- Libraries can hold their own business to business networking events. The Miller Business Resource Center holds two trade shows a year that encourage and promote networking.
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 - The Strictly Business Trade Show is held in partnership with the local chamber of commerce and the Town's coalition of chambers. It was started to allow local businesses to promote themselves and to network with other local businesses.
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 - The Women's Expo features women entrepreneurs who are just starting out. The goal of the Expo is to give these women the opportunity to network with local businesswomen and organizations, who can help them as they grow their businesses.
- Libraries can host other networking groups such as the local chamber of commerce. Librarians can become active in other local business organizations. These organizations may want to hold a meeting at the library. This gives librarians the opportunity to present the resources they offer to a new group of businesspeople.

Online Networking

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the plethora of social networking tools available now. Some of the most popular with businesses and business people are LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook. Online networking tools are only as effective as your handling of them. Many users log onto a social networking site and immediately "friend" everyone they know (or think they know) and then do nothing. If you do nothing, then you are not networking.

When choosing contacts on social networking sites, consider who you have met, might meet or want to meet at a networking event – colleagues, local businesses, government officials, etc. When you request a connection be sure to include a personal note stating why you think you should connect. Once the connection has been accepted, follow-up with a thank you.

On all of these social networking sites, it is important to pay attention to your connections, friends, or followers. LinkedIn allows users to get recommendations. If you have a good experience with someone, consider recommending them. Twitter users follow friends and are able to see what friends are posting. If a friend posts good news, you should send congratulations via Twitter. Be sure to use their @twitter name. Mentions can be invaluable to business people. Each mention is another chance for them to connect with someone new. Facebook users can post comments and recommendations to other users' pages. As with the other networking tools, the more mentions and posts, the more chances for new connections.

Starting to network can be daunting, but steady practice will enable you to master networking. Don't wait to be at a networking meeting to network. Once you hone your skills you'll find that networking can be done anywhere.