

Networking at work

The word 'networking' strikes terror into many hearts. Ewa Jasinska-Davidson explains how to put networking into practice for your business



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We live in a digital era, one where a lot of our 'networking' goes on without leaving home: we update our LinkedIn pages, add to our personal websites, or Tweet. All the same I still believe that nothing can replace the real encounter. However much we do online, it's always best to combine the two approaches and use them to complement each other.

Networking, in person, is still a necessity in today's world. After all, as interpreters or translators we are working in a niche market, and a 'hard sell' won't work – most people do not realise the value of our services. Yet while we are all familiar with the idea of networking – meeting other people with the specific aim of expanding our circle of contacts – many of us find that even though we attend networking events, we get very little from them. Personally I do like meeting people, but it is still hard to find the time to put into real-life networking.

So how can we network effectively, in a manner that does not take up too much time?

Choose carefully

Don't simply sign up to every single networking event you have been invited to or that you have spotted on social media. Start by asking yourself what your reason for networking is. Do you want more clients, to expand your knowledge in your particular industry or to meet more people in the field? (After all, we all know how much work we pick up through referrals.) Be selective where you spend your precious time by asking even more questions: who attends those events? Are they likely to need translations?

But do identify some options! In fact it's a good idea to have a rolling programme over the year of events that you plan to attend; and don't forget opportunities when you are working in other countries too.

Do your homework

Once you've selected your event, do some more 'due diligence'. If there is a list of participants, go through it. Check LinkedIn profiles and/or websites. It's even a good idea to identify a few people that you want to speak to, and connect with them on LinkedIn before attending a particular conference or event.

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Also, plan how you're going to introduce yourself. Think of some examples of how you helped your last clients and how they benefited from your services; try to select specific examples relevant to the group of people attending this event. Preparing those few sentences (known as the 'elevator pitch') will make you stand out from the crowd.

Be personal and personable

Make sure you look professional and have a friendly smile. According to Wojciech Kołodziejczak, who spoke to the Interpreters' Development Network last December, the best

networkers don't chat excessively but focus instead on a few key things.

Instead of talking about yourself, ask others what they do. That is the only way to find out which (if any) of your services you might be able to offer them in the future. Try to use open questions: how did you like the presentation? What did you like most during this trade show? People love to talk about their companies and you often discover quite unexpected things. It is better to speak to fewer people productively than to have a lot of conversations that never get anywhere. Once you have found out more about them, then you can talk about your own experiences, and try to uncover some challenges you might be able to help them overcome (even if that means recommending one of your reliable contacts; they'll still value your input). And don't forget to exchange business cards.

Follow up afterwards

You can come home with 50 business cards in your pocket, but if you don't do anything with them, you have just wasted a whole evening, meeting random people you will never see again. Send emails to people you valued meeting, or connect with them via LinkedIn. If you promised an introduction to your contact or supplier, make sure that you keep your word. Keep in touch with worthwhile contacts and suggest meeting up again, either in person or virtually.

Don't aim for the quick win

Networking is about building long-term relationships. You're very unlikely to get instant results. But if you work at it, those relationships will grow over time; the secret is to be patient and persist. And last but not least, when you are approached for work, make sure you deliver to a standard that will ensure your clients become enthusiastic advocates for your work among their own networks too.

Good luck and enjoy your networking. You never know where it may lead! 