



The Art of Effective Networking

It's all about relationship-building

By Susan Baka

Many people assume that networking is about working a room, glad-handing everyone in sight and handing out as many business cards as you can. But that could not be further from the case. The art of effective networking lies in building relationships that can lead to business down the road. Let me share a story to demonstrate this and the power of networking. In 2000, along with a group of Toronto-based businesswomen, I helped establish the first Canadian chapter of the *Organization of Women in International Trade* (OWIT) – a global association dedicated to advancing trade opportunities for women.

When our executive attended an RBC Royal Bank networking event in 2002, we had the opportunity to meet an Australian banker. We encouraged her to start the first chapter of OWIT 'down under' and we offered our chapter as a mentor. She took up the challenge. In 2003, I was invited to Sydney, Australia – along with a fellow OWIT member – to participate in the official launch of OWIT-Australia and to share best practices in chapter start-up with its founding Board. We had the opportunity to speak at the launch, where we met some amazing women business owners – including **Robyn Henderson**, a global networking specialist and international speaker (www.networkingtowin.com.au).

I was impressed by Robyn's work on the importance of developing successful strategic alliances. When she made plans to come to Canada for a trade mission, I looked for ways to expose her message to small business owners in Canada. In the Collingwood area, I found ideal partners – **Karen Burland** of RBC Dominion Securities, **Tillie MacDonald** of the Centre for Business & Economic Development, and the local media. We formed a partnership to bring Robyn to Collingwood to speak on strategic alliances. Over 120 businesspeople attended – a win-win for all the partners. And it all came about through networking. You just never know where it can lead!

There's no question that networking can be one of the most successful ways to build your business. Here's how you can become an effective networker:

- **Join an organization.** Join your Chamber of Commerce, a business association or a community club to expand your contacts. Volunteering for a board or committee is a terrific way to build relationships.
- **Prepare.** Before attending any business event, give some thought to what you hope to get out of it and what you can share in return. Who will be attending? What specifically would you like to approach them about and how can you help them? Remember, it's not all about getting. What you give will come back tenfold.
- **Act like the host and not the guest.** This is Robyn's advice for approaching strangers at events and maximizing your effectiveness.
- **Follow up.** If you promised something to a new contact, respond in a timely way. And reinforce the relationship by keeping in touch – for example, by periodically sending information they will find valuable.

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