

"[T]HIS TERRIFIC BOOK...PROVIDES AN ARSENAL OF EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING A PRODUCTIVE NETWORK OF COLLEAGUES."

– DAN PINK, author of *TO SELL IS HUMAN* and *DRIVE*

NETWORKING



IS NOT WORKING

STOP COLLECTING BUSINESS CARDS AND
START MAKING MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS

DEREK COBURN

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CHAPTER 01

**WHY TRADITIONAL
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There are many reasons why networking is not working, but the most common source of frustration involves the role of networking events themselves. Large, traditional networking events are a time-honored institution. They have been a staple of aspiring professionals for so long that most networking advice centers not on *whether* you should attend them, but how to make the most of them when you inevitably do. In theory, they're one of the best ways to grow your business. After all, most advice will tell you that a networking event is a room full of people just like you (business professionals) looking for the same thing you are (clients and growth). It's fish in a barrel and everyone has a gun. The logic of this arrangement has become unimpeachable the larger these events get, to the point where large networking events have become sacred cows.

Here's the problem: you're almost certainly not getting the consistent results you're looking for. And at some point, when the majority of professionals taking part in these rituals are seeing drastically diminished returns on their investment in them, we have to start looking at networking itself.

If you asked 20 people who consider networking essential to their success what the word means to them, you'd probably get 20 different answers: business development, anxiety, finding a job, extroversion, necessary evil.

None of these descriptions is incorrect, but they are all different.

Here is the definition from Merriam Webster: *the exchange of information or services among individuals, groups, or institutions; specifically the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or business.*

Not bad, but still fairly broad. And I highly doubt that

would have been one of the responses you got from your 20-person sample.

In an effort to get us on the same page, I have come up with a definition that I hope will resonate with you. It is the definition I will be applying to the word “networking” every time I use it throughout this book.

NETWORKING: any activity that increases the value of your network and/or the value you contribute to it.

Regardless of how you define networking, your level of success will be directly tied to your ability to interact with other professionals who are looking to achieve many of the same things you are with your business. Unfortunately, this will be challenging if you rely on larger events because, like it or not, the deck is stacked against you.

NETWORKING EVENTS – THE NIGHTCLUBS OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT



The most basic problem with traditional networking events is that they are mixing bowls for professionals who are there for different reasons. No matter how you slice it, everyone in the room is focused on his or her own personal agenda, whether it be signing up a new client, creating awareness for their business, or connecting with someone in the hopes of developing a mutually beneficial relationship. It's an “every man/woman for themselves” kind of game, and since everyone is playing a slightly different game, there are usually no clear winners.

I was at an event once and a guy came up to me and introduced himself. Introductions are always tricky because everyone usually has a “strategy”—they have a go-to line or a quick elevator pitch. This guy breezed

through his introduction like a normal person, then proceeded to talk about himself for no fewer than four straight minutes. Try listening to someone for four minutes straight who you have not paid to see speak. It's impossible, especially when you were expecting to have a conversation, which requires two people to take the time to actively and respectfully listen to each other. One minute into his spiel, it was obvious I was being pitched to, so I checked out. He wrapped up by giving me his card and walking away.

The majority of professionals who regularly attend networking events are not as bad as this but they suffer from the same problem: they are looking for instant gratification. And because they want success *now*, they use bad metrics such as new “potential” clients engaged, or number of meetings scheduled, to define that success and determine its magnitude.

In a recent article for the *Wall Street Journal*, Gary Vaynerchuk—the master networker and businessman—hammers this point home, reminding us that there

are still many people “who think ‘good networking’ is predicated on the distribution of business cards; that giving a card to anybody in the room is somehow meaningful or useful.” Gary V is right on the money when he says, “Effective networking is about reversing the game everybody instinctively plays. It’s about patience and buildup, not the close. We celebrate audacity and courage instead of patience and value.”

In my four-minute “interaction,” Business Card Billy never took the time to ask for my name. He didn’t have the patience to ask the name of my business. In fact, he didn’t ask me anything at all. He was so focused on his reason for being at this event—telling anyone who will listen about his business—that he forgot about ME. He reminded me of Bette Midler’s character from *Beaches*: “Enough about me, let’s talk about you. What do *you* think about me?”

The man’s only saving grace was that he left before he could spill anything on me like so many of those other networking event attendees who like to wave

their hands around while telling you how great they are. These guys almost always have a drink in their hand and some of it invariably ends up on your shirt. I don't want to think about how much I've spent on dry cleaning over the last decade just on drink-splattered shirts from networking events.

Needless to say, we've all experienced networking nightmares like this. Of course there will also be professionals at these events who, like you, have a long-term view and are looking to establish meaningful connections with other attendees. But they are becoming fewer and farther between.

Instead, you're getting people like Mr. Me Me Me, or folks who show up looking for a job. I don't have a major issue with the job seekers. Getting out and meeting people is what they should be doing. Heck, their presence can even be beneficial: meeting someone who could be a great employee for someone else in your network can put you in the position of creating real value for your network as a whole if you connect them.

More often than not, however, conversations with job seekers do not lead anywhere. I get frustrated whenever I go to an event and end up meeting people whose only objective is securing my email so they can pass along their resume. This approach never works. If I am looking to hire a new employee, I know exactly what I need and I go out to find it. I do not leave it up to chance at large networking events. But here's the thing: from the email-securing jobseeker's perspective, our interaction was a success, even though (objectively speaking) meeting me was not good for either of us.

In many ways, including the ways I've just described, traditional networking is a lot like dating. It's a part of life you get more tired of the older you get, especially as it gets harder to find people who are looking for the same things you are. Networking events are the apotheosis of this problem. As David Siteman Garland, creator of The Rise To The Top & Create Awesome Online Courses put it, "Networking events are like nightclubs, because most people there are just looking for a professional one-night stand."

As a businessperson, for your networking efforts to be successful, you need to be in a room full of your ideal prospective clients. This is obviously not the case with large networking events. So walking around acting like everyone could benefit from hiring you and eagerly telling them how great your business is does you no good. In fact, it can do you a fair amount of harm, since telling us how great your products and services are immediately after introducing yourself is, essentially, in-person cold calling—which everyone despises.

To expand on the dating analogy, books about finding your ideal partner or “soul mate” generally don’t advise you to go to nightclubs every night. If you’re looking to meet someone nice who might be suitable for a committed relationship, why would you waste your time in a crowded place that is so loud you can’t even hear yourself think? Plus, it’s not like you’re going to meet many people who are there for the same reason you are. It’s common sense. Everyone gets that!

Instead, the best dating books suggest that you lever-

age your friendships and expose yourself to environments that are more conducive to finding a compatible mate. Get personal introductions from friends, host dinner parties, let the people who know you best set you up. Dating for love is not a volume business. Networking for the long-term benefit of your business is the exact same thing, or at least it *should* be.

Unfortunately, all of the networking books and articles I have read focus their advice on how to make the most out of networking by *attending events*. It's as if there is only one game to play, and the key is to play that game a certain way. Namely, A LOT. The ritual of the large networking event, and the shared motivations of its players, is so firmly entrenched that I am dubious about its ability to accommodate new approaches. The good news, as you will see in later chapters, is that you don't actually have to play that game at all.

WATCH OUT FOR PROFESSIONAL ONE-NIGHT STANDS



If you're anything like me, you've spent many an evening at networking events trying to shake off the onslaught of professional one-night standers while searching for the professional equivalent of an ideal mate. Needless to say, we usually go home disappointed. Why is that? What is wrong with us?

Let me ask that question another way: If you were making more money than you ever imagined working with clients you absolutely loved and had more high-quality prospects looking to hire you than you had time for, how often would you go to networking events?

I am guessing your answer would be, "Hardly ever" or "Only if I had to."

Running a successful business leaves little time for networking. As the quality of your clients and the value of your business increase, so too will the value of your time. Before long, you will find yourself jealously guarding that time not just for yourself, but also for your clients and the business you have taken such great pains to develop. It's only natural then that you will be less likely to subject yourself to large, cattle-call networking events.

It is for these very reasons that you will rarely find your ideal professional mate at a networking event. These are also the reasons why the *regular* attendees at networking events are almost always one-night standers. They are the people who are just starting out or running a flailing, mediocre business and looking for anyone who might be able to help (or save) them in any way. They are looking for quick fixes, short-term remedies, stop-gap measures. They aren't worried (yet) about cultivating long-term relationships, so fittingly they have the most time to spare on networking. I do not fault them necessarily. It's hard to focus on developing long-term

relationships when you have to worry about paying the mortgage next month or making payroll next week. However, that doesn't mean we have to be their next victims.

I'm sorry to be the one to break the bad news and burst the networking bubble, but the fact remains that professionals trying to get something out of you, whose product or service is too unremarkable to yield new clients in a more efficient manner, represent the majority of attendees at networking events. The people you *really* want to meet are busy making better use of their time. This dichotomy is what makes most of us dread showing up to events.

And yet, we still go. It's been drilled into us that the only way to find diamonds is to forage in this rough. This is how my relationship with networking morphed until my growing client base—and the time I needed to devote to it—made me question the hours I spent in said rough and forced me to reevaluate my strategy for finding diamonds. In reality, I should have seen it coming, as it was

eerily similar to the inflection point I arrived at during my early cold-calling days. Hopefully, I can save you the thousands of hours I wasted by shining a spotlight on the inefficiencies of attending these larger events.

NETWORKING EVENTS VS. COLD-CALLING



In the early years of growing my practice, I did not have a lot of existing clients to take care of and spent just about every waking hour either in meetings, or trying to set them up.

I knew if I called 300 people every day, 30 would let me talk to them and six would schedule a meeting. Of those six, one would become a client. Getting new clients and growing my business was the only thing that mattered, so I was unconcerned with the fact that it took 6-10

hours of constant effort to yield one client; let alone that my conversation rate was .003%, or 1/3 of one percent.

I was also not concerned whether my new client would be a *good* client. If someone wanted to work with me, I was happy to have them. The fact that I needed them more than they needed me—or at least that’s what I let myself think—led me to spend a lot of time spinning my wheels, trying to please them. For many of these clients, I was fighting a losing battle, because what I could provide was not exactly what they were looking for. It was like the dance of the square peg and the round hole.

I don’t blame my old clients, though. I had contacted them out of the blue and they didn’t really know much about me. There wasn’t much chance our working relationships would be long and fruitful. As those engagements began to fade away, the reality of my business became much clearer. I didn’t want or need (nor could I afford) clients just for the sake of clients. I needed to find my *ideal* clients. The good news is, after

a few years, I had developed a solid group with whom I enjoyed working. The bad news, at least in retrospect, was that it took way more than 6-10 hours to find each of them. When you factor in all the extra work I did to engage and service those clients who were not a good fit, it took *days* of constant effort to find one who was.

This was not a tenable situation. Nor was it scalable. There was no way I could grow if this is how it was going to be. Getting a taste of these more rewarding client experiences drove that point home and made me begin to value my time more. It gave me the confidence to do away with smiling and dialing.

My clients were happy about it too, even if they weren't aware of my shift in perspective, because I was now spending more time focusing on their needs. Not surprisingly, I began getting great referrals from some of them. The people on the other end of these introductions were obviously much easier to engage than the folks I was cold-calling. Like dating, you're more likely to hit it off when a mutual friend sets you up than you

are going down the row hitting on strangers at the club.

Still, when I finally made the shift, I was not busting at the seams with ideal clients who were keeping me busy 100% of the time. I needed to dedicate *some* time towards growing my business. It was at this point that I started focusing even more on networking events and attending them more frequently. I enjoyed them for the most part and convinced myself for several years that they were a good use of my time. They were face-to-face, after all, and everyone in attendance had chosen to be there. Networking events were light years away from the intrusive drudgery of cold-calling. That's what I told myself anyway.

Part of the reason I fooled myself into believing I was spending my time wisely was because I was comparing networking events to cold-calling. Cold-calling is a business development practice that is nowhere near as prevalent as it once was. Today, most people have cell phones with Caller ID and have put their phone numbers on federal "Do Not Call" lists. This makes just

getting through to someone a nearly impossible task and compels many newcomers to skip over what so many of us had to endure in favor of going straight to networking.

If you've never had to cold-call as a way to develop new business, you have been spared the brutal, non-stop agony of rejection. Unlike cold-calling or following up on dead-end leads, with networking events there is no fear of (or actual experience of) rejection. There is only a harmless exchange of business cards or email addresses followed by empty promises to "connect" or "circle back" later in the week. Doesn't the removal of immediate rejection automatically make networking events better than cold-calling?

I now know, based on my experience and regular attendance, that the answer is No. Networking events aren't any more productive—or less intrusive—than cold-calling. Your chances of meeting someone who aligns with your goals are no better face-to-face with a perfect stranger than they are over the phone with someone

who isn't expecting your call. And at least with immediate rejection you save valuable time.

Don't worry, I am not about to advocate cold-calling as an alternative to attending networking events! What I'm suggesting is that we have a tendency to think we are being productive while networking because there is no negative reinforcement when it's not working. My fear is that many professionals are wasting the same amount of time, and without the fear of rejection driving them to escape this time-suck, it will continue until there is no time left and their businesses have failed.

By the same token, I am also not saying you should abandon networking as a practice. Networking, whether online or off, can be a great way to grow your business and add value to your network. The problems come from *how* you do it. You must have a defined approach. Just doing it, just showing up, will never consistently lead you to the types of professionals with whom long-term business relationships are possible, let alone profitable.

Don't get me wrong, it can work from time to time. Despite some of the more extreme examples I just laid out, most of your interactions at networking events are with nice people who make for seemingly harmless conversations. And once in a while, those conversations are with great people who actually appear to share your worldview. Unfortunately, many of them will present their own set of challenges.

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?



Of late, a more evolved form of networking—let’s call it Networking 2.0—has arisen from a bevy of advice books. Taking a page from John F. Kennedy’s 1961 Inaugural Address (“Ask not what your country can do for you...”), they tell us to focus not on what other people at networking events can do for us, but what we can do for them.

Can we introduce them to someone? Do we have a piece of unsolicited strategic advice we could give them? Maybe we could refer them to prospective clients?

I am all for this shift in focus, in theory. I love connecting people. And plenty of professionals with good intentions, who are not looking to pitch their business (i.e. the ones you want to meet), still go to networking events, so it could absolutely work. Plus, my way of thinking and my long-term view on developing profes-

sional relationships already comport with most of the advice these kinds of books offer up.

Here's the problem though: much of the Networking 1.0 crowd (Mr. Me Me Me , for instance) read these books too, and realized that if they showed just a modicum of interest in the person they were meeting—they didn't need to actually be interested—it could lead to more business. It would take a little longer, sure, but if they put forth even a little effort—the minimum amount—other professionals would feel obligated to do the same for them, only better.

Almost immediately, the new philosophy that could have saved networking events made them more difficult. The people who made them miserable to attend, who we tried to avoid at all costs, became harder to spot. They blended right in with the real professionals we value so highly. Now if I'm at a networking event and someone wants to learn more about me and how they can help me, all it does is set off my bullshit detector. My first thought is "what's the catch?" They could be sincere,

I know, but it's more likely they're taking this tack because they read about it in a book. I'm sure many of you have already discovered this for yourselves in the world of networking: those people asking how they can help you right off the bat are not interested in helping you. They're interested in you helping them.

I learned this lesson the hard way. As someone who initially embraced the Networking 2.0 approach, I was all for indiscriminately “paying it forward.” I would help anyone and everyone I encountered. A reference, an email address, advice, a tip, it didn't really matter what they needed, because it was all going to come back around to me in the end; like business karma. And boy did it ever.

At one point, I introduced a new acquaintance from a recent event to a very good client of mine. This new connection appeared to be a good guy with a good business, so making the introduction seemed likely to create some potential synergies. I connected them via email with a nice, complimentary note and let them

take it from there to set up a call or a lunch or whatever would work for their purposes.

The day after their first meeting, my client called. My new acquaintance had pitched him within the first 20 minutes. It was horrible, and his pitch was worse. My client had called to warn me about him more than anything, but I'm sure he was questioning my judgment at least a little bit. Fortunately their encounter didn't ruin my existing business relationship, but lesson learned:

NEVER put your reputation on the line with clients by introducing them to people you don't know much about.

Think about it: why should you go out of our way to advance the business interests of someone you just met, when it means involving someone whose business interests you are already being paid to protect and advance? It is a recipe for disaster.

This brings me to another dating analogy. Let's say Mary is out on the town one evening with her girlfriends and a seemingly nice guy named Gary strikes up a conversation with her. Now, Mary is interested in having a committed relationship, but she's *at a bar* to dance and hang out with her friends—not to find a soul mate. What would her reaction be if, shortly after exchanging pleasantries, Gary tells Mary that he's looking to settle down and get married? She'll either 1) assume he's hitting on her and masking his true intentions or 2) think he's serious...which is kind of worse. (Psycho alert!)

As much as she might want a relationship, Mary will not react favorably to Gary's advances. Making this kind of declaration to someone you just met at a bar is not consistent with the expectations in this environment. When you're sitting on a barstool it comes off as creepy. When you're at a networking event, it comes off as bullshit.

Don't believe me? Just for fun, the next time you attend a networking event, strike up a conversation with someone and immediately tell them you're looking to

develop a meaningful professional relationship, and you'd like to know how you can help them. What do you guess their reaction is going to be? Actually, you don't have to guess because I've already tested this on more than one occasion. It went about as well as our friend Gary's unsolicited pronouncements of monogamy and matrimonial intent. Which is to say, it went really bad.

A pay-it-forward approach is not without merits. It should just be reserved for professionals you know and have confidence in. If you focus on helping someone you don't know in order to start a *quid pro quo* game for your own benefit, you run the risk of putting someone you *do* know in the hands of someone who will waste their time or worse, take advantage of them. How will that make you look?

In the words of Warren Buffett, "It takes a lifetime to build a reputation and only 15 minutes to destroy it."

FINALLY! BUT, ALAS...



As I worked my way through the evolution of networking, one of the keys I figured out was strategically identifying people you can help who can also help you. This is a skill in and of itself, but even those of us who got good at it could run into some really frustrating situations. I cannot even begin to count the number of times I've met a promising business contact only to run smack into another pitfall of traditional networking: Email Purgatory.

I had a process for following up with worthy folks I met through various networking channels. Within a day or two of meeting, I'd look at their websites and scour their LinkedIn profiles to get a better sense of who they were and how we might be able to collaborate. Then I'd email them to express my earnest desire to continue exploring whether we could help each other. I wouldn't ask for a meeting. Like our face time at the event where we met,

my communication was not “sales-y.” I practiced Networking 2.0 to the letter.

And yet, what kind of response did I get? Not much. There were times when I’d email someone after a seriously great introduction and my helping hand was completely ignored. *Really?* I’d think, *You don’t have time to respond to someone who could be a great source of potential referrals?* If you were to ask those people today why they didn’t reply back then, I’d be willing to bet it had nothing to do with the medium or the message. It wasn’t because I was a jerk or spamming the hell out of them. There was something else going on.

The problem, I realized soon enough, was dedicated time. Responding to emails takes time, and time is money.

That’s why the post-event email routine is fundamentally flawed. Unconsciously, you are assuming your counterpart is exactly as busy and just as eager to connect as you are. But there is just so much happening on the

other end you couldn't possibly know about, that it's foolhardy to have any kind of expectations. You never know what someone else might be going through. Your contact could simply have something more pressing going on that day: a family issue, a client issue, or something revenue-generating. If they don't have the bandwidth the day you email or they aren't in the mood to start developing a new business relationship that week, it's not going to happen.

Slowly but surely, I came to the conclusion that networking events weren't any better than cold-calling; in fact, they were probably worse. In the beginning I didn't think either one was all that bad. For a while I actually liked going to networking events. The difference was that now, unlike when I was first starting out, I had a business to run and clients to take care of. I started noticing how much time all of this networking was taking, and how little return I was getting on my investment.

For a glimpse into the time-sucking world, consider these time expenditures:

- Attending networking events, actively meeting and mingling
- Sifting through people - names, faces, companies, titles, personal details, etc.
- Identifying and researching contacts who might have potential as clients or partners
- Crafting and sending emails to these contacts
- Having lunch, coffee, etc. with those you hit it off with

Let's assume you're great at each of these things and you complete them with the utmost efficiency. Conservatively, this is still at least 24 hours out of your week. That's a *full* day you've lost, a day that could have been used to service clients and contacts you already have. Over the course of a year, that's 50+ days. *Seven weeks!* Can you imagine what else you could do to grow your current business with seven weeks?

Now I am not suggesting that you never attend another networking event. They can be valuable if leveraged properly. What I am saying is, if you agree that net-

working is any activity that increases the value of your network and/or the value you contribute to it, there are a number of alternatives that will save you time and accelerate the growth of your business.

I am excited to share them with you in the pages to come.