

It's good to talk

As the saying goes, it's good to talk - but if you're trying to build up your business, it is absolutely essential.

You can promote your product or service in a whole host of ways - by advertising, sponsorship or opening up on a prime site in the high street.

But for most growing companies, the most efficient way is just to get out there and tell others what you can do for them.

Networking, as it's called, is one of the fastest, cheapest and most effective ways of getting your name known. It requires little more than a smile, a couple of hours of your time and a stackful of business cards.

In many ways, though, networking is like playing chess - mastering the basics is easy, but learning to do it well can take a lifetime.

You have to be friendly rather than pushy, and firm rather than fawning. And, it's a two-way process. If you're expecting others to give you business, then you have to give others the chance to sell to you too.

You also have to pick your opportunities. Being invited along to the annual dinner of your local fishing club, for instance, isn't going to win you business if you're developing a thermal shield coupling for the space shuttle. You'd be far better trying to get into a drinks-and-nibbles discussion with officials of the European Space Agency.

Most of us, though, don't run that kind of highly-specialised business. There are lots of networking events on offer and we should be able to get something out of most of them.

Chambers of commerce, local enterprise companies, industry groups, local business clubs, commercial organisations and women's groups all regularly run events which allow people to get together and see if they can do business with each other.

These events can be formal dinners, lunch meetings with speakers, working breakfasts or stand-up sessions over coffee and biscuits or a drink.

One recent phenomenon has been the growth of so-called speed networking, where participants get a few minutes to sell their businesses to another person. They

It's fast, cheap and effective. Networking really can get your business moving, says

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then listen to what the other person has to sell before moving on to the next attendee.

Elaine Roger, who runs events for Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, said: "If you want to build up your business, networking is absolutely crucial."

She organises everything from small social gatherings up to lunches for 300.

She said: "If you're a small company - and 85 per cent of businesses in the Glasgow area are - then networking gives you a real chance to promote yourself."

To get the most out of networking, there are certain rules to stick to:

- Be yourself. Be warm, friendly and listen to what others have to say.

- Spend time building up rapport, but don't stick with one person all night. Chat for a few minutes, then politely move on.

- Prepare an "elevator pitch" in advance. This means being able to say what your firm does and why people might want to employ your services in around 30 seconds.

- Some people think that successful networking means handing out as many business cards as possible. But if you don't talk to people too, it's not much use.

- Don't be aggressive, pushy or critical.

- Don't expect immediate results. It's unlikely, though possible.

This is about making friends, not enemies. Elaine suggests that newcomers to



networking try out different events to see what works best for them.

She acknowledges that some people may be shy about going along for the first time, but says the best way is just to jump in.

Elaine said: "We always look after people who we know are networking for the first time. We'll introduce them to someone who is supportive and knows how to go round the room."

"We usually find that, within minutes, the shyness has gone. It might feel a bit awkward if you've not done it before, but others will understand."

"Introduce and sell yourself as well as making it clear that you're interested in what they have to say too."

Women can often be better networkers than men, and it's not unusual to find events aimed at females.

Perth-based Tricia Fox is the founder of Bacon and Eggs Entrepreneurs, which has meetings across Scotland. Her events aren't exclusive to women, but they're

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very popular with them. While most networking events are 90 per cent male and 10 per cent female, hers are 50-50.

Tricia said: "Our meetings are informal and start at 9am. It's a good time for people who have done the school run and, because we're relaxed and there are no speeches, you can arrive late."

Gerry Diamond is managing director of the Coatbridge-based Endowment Compensation Centre. He believes networking is vital to his success.

He said: "It's incredibly important. When I started out, I wasn't just looking for clients - I was wanting expertise too."

"I'd never done any advertising or public relations, so I needed to find people to help me with that sort of thing. It worked for me."

Gerry still networks, speaking at events such as Rotary Club lunches.

He said: "People will come over to you and raise issues, and that in turn can win new business. It's an excellent way of meeting people."

Starting points

THE Federation of Small Business (www.fsb.org.uk) has a strong presence in Scotland.

The Institute of Directors (www.iad.com) provides high level networking events and also provides advice.

The Entrepreneurial Exchange has a membership of more than 400 Scottish entrepreneurs. Find out more at www.entex.co.uk

Yes Scotland meet! in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Perth on Saturday evenings. Log on to www.yes-scotland.com

We-entrepreneurs hosts dinner in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen. Details at www.weentrepreneurs.com

Bacon and Eggs Entrepreneurs provides informal networking in Perth, Dundee, Glasgow, Stirling, Dumfries, Edinburgh and St Andrews. www.business9am.co.uk

Aberdeen Entrepreneurs provides an opportunity for businessmen and women in the North East to meet with invited speakers, visits and social events. Check out their site at www.aberdeenentrepreneurs.com