8 Steps to Building a Powerful Professional Network
Introduction

The power of your network will propel you to a successful career no matter what your aspirations are.

The best jobs. The inside track to growing your business. Engaging interactions with amazing people. None of this happens by accident. It’s your network that provides the tools and knowledge needed to reach the next level.

This book will teach you not only why networking is important, but also how to engage with people in memorable, relationship-building ways. There are many misconceptions about professional networking. Far too many people approach it in the wrong way, and women face unique challenges due to the standard formats of socialization, gender stereotypes, and the higher concentration of men in the executive ranks.

Building a network that taps into those women who have risen in the ranks already, while overcoming the decades-old social barriers, takes time and perseverance. But with the right mindset, anyone can do it. With the following tips, you can form a powerful network that will help you reach your career goals and accomplish so much more.
The Importance of Networking to Your Career

Many people approach networking as a means to an end. They want a new job or an in with a company they’ve always dreamed of working for, or they are seeking new clients in a particular field.

But your professional network isn’t meant to be a shotgun for your resume or a billboard for your business. It’s not about collecting the most business cards or spamming an Excel file full of people you barely remember on LinkedIn.

It’s about building real relationships that are mutually beneficial, so that when you need help with something—whether it’s finding a new job or building a client portfolio—you have a resource you can tap. At the same time, you become part of a resource network for so many other people.

Change your perspective from “Is this a potential client?” or “Can they get me a job?” to “How much value can we provide one another?”

Networking is about more than physically attending events. It’s about your mindset and being able and willing to engage with people you meet for mutual benefit. Your expectations should be realistic:

The Benefits Are Not Immediate – How can you form a mutually beneficial relationship? What skills and perspectives can you offer one another? You may see the benefits of fostering a professional relationship within a few weeks or not for years down the line.

Networking Is about Quality, Not Quantity – Getting 500 business cards or giving that many out is meaningless if you don’t remember the people you met. It’s better to exchange 20 business cards and fully remember who you met, what they do, what you discussed, and what you can offer one another.

Networking Is about Giving, Not Just Receiving – How much are you giving back to your connections? Keep your professional relationships balanced. Do this by sharing useful information, introducing people to one another when it benefits both of them, and passing along resumes or contact information for new opportunities. Do this often enough, and people will remember you and be there when you need the same in return.
Getting a Return on Your Networking Investment

You should focus on others first when building relationships, but what about you? Eventually, there needs to be a real return on your time investment.

The most successful businesswomen are bolstered by strong professional networks. By knowing the right people in the right places, you can tap opportunities to which you didn’t previously have access (or that you simply didn’t know existed).

By investing in your networking, building relationships, and helping people when you are able to do so, you create a wealth of future opportunities that will bear fruit over time.

Networking is the most important investment of your time that you can make in your career. Here’s why making that investment is vital to ensuring your success:

Tap a Network of Experts Instead of Search Engines for Burning Questions – Time is your most precious resource, and nothing wastes time like trying to learn something when resources are scarce. Whether starting a new project, preparing for a new career, or simply building a wealth of knowledge about a new topic, your network can help you do it faster and more accurately than a Google search ever could.

Gain Perspective and Advice about Career Decisions – Are you getting ready to change careers? Enter a new market? Launch your own business? Having a strong network can help you better prepare for the difficult steps required to do so. Whereas family and friends are biased in their support, your professional contacts can be open and honest in ways that will help you find success in new endeavors.

When Connections Move up, Everyone Benefits – Your network will be with you for years to come, so when a connection gets promoted, starts a business, or celebrates success in their endeavors, be there for them and share in celebrating those successes. By maintaining a warm network, career advancements become beneficial not just to your connections, but to everyone who helped them get there.

Build a Reputation over Time – If you have a strong network, you’ll meet like-minded entrepreneurs with valuable skill sets. If you want to move up but are stuck in a dead-end position, networking can get you off that linear path and into a position with greater opportunities. Build your reputation, and tap into your network for benefits over time.
Overcoming Challenges in Networking

Very few women will sincerely say that networking is easy. Most people struggle with one or more aspects of the process: meeting new people, leaving their comfort zone, or volunteering to lead new initiatives. These aren’t easy things to do. For some people, getting out of the house at all is difficult. But there are ways to streamline the process, make it easier, and enjoy the benefits that so many people gain from having a robust personal network.

The challenges start with the gender dynamic and the inherent struggle of many professional women to build confidence. Women are often held to a different standard than men and told to work harder, inherently downplaying their professional achievements. With the overemphasis on looks and presentation, women often feel less confident in professional networking situations. It’s a challenge for many, but definitely one you can overcome.

Overcoming a lack of confidence, institutional barriers in the workplace, or general anxiety about networking takes time, but there are some tricks you can use to get started:

Take Risks to Build Confidence – Risk-taking and confidence-building go hand-in-hand. Taking risks—such as pitching a prospective client for a larger project than you typically take on, or initiating a conversation at a conference—helps you grow both personally and professionally, and manifest confidence in professional situations.

Many Women Rely on Other Women for Networking – Women who feel more comfortable networking with other women will miss out on many networking opportunities that tend to skew towards men. Experienced professional women who have venture backing or have risen to C-suites have a far smaller pool of similarly ranked professional women to work with. Overcoming this dynamic is difficult, especially because of how these interactions often occur, but should remain top of mind as you work to grow your network.

Learn to Work a Room – Look for open 2s and 3s in conversation. It can be intimidating if you find yourself on the outside of dozens of active conversations at the same time, scanning the room for someone who is similarly detached. Instead, look for smaller groups of two or three people you can join.

Practice Delivering Your Elevator Pitch – Create a 30-second elevator pitch about what you do, why it’s interesting, and how it could benefit the people you meet (without trying to sell anything). You’ll be ready to go when someone asks, “What do you do?” At the same time, look for body language signals that people are interested. If their eyebrows go up, you’ve made a catch. If they go down? You’re losing them.
Questions to Ask to Get Started – Not sure where to start? Here are several questions from Bob Burg, professional speaker and author of “10 Feel-Good Questions,” to keep in your back pocket for conversation jump-starts if things start to lull. Just two or three of these can carry a conversation long enough to make a real connection:

- What do you enjoy most about your profession?
- What separates you and your company from the competition?
- What advice would you give someone just starting in the business?
- What one thing would you do with your business if you knew you could not fail?
- What significant changes have you seen take place in your profession through the years?
- What do you see as the coming trends in your business?
- What ways have you found to be most effective for promoting your business?
- What one sentence would you like people to use in describing the way you do business?
Know Where to Network

Knowing where to network is important for getting the most out of your efforts.

Conferences, expos, trade shows, and the like are efficient ways to meet people in your field, but they can be chaotic events that don’t afford enough time to really meet and get to know someone. If you’re new to networking in person, they can also feel intimidating.

That is why it’s so important to diversify your networking opportunities with both major industry events and smaller, local engagements where you can spend more time with people and follow up in the future.

Most people start building their network with the people they know through current and previous employers, such as co-workers, supervisors, and clients. If your aspirations are more entrepreneurial, you’ll need to start with your clients and perhaps your academic relationships. Alumni associations can be helpful resources for networking in addition to helping you stay in touch with former classmates.

Local Meetup Groups — Local groups that meet regularly are preferable to one-off events. The latter are good for practicing your elevator pitch and putting yourself out there if you’re more introverted. For longer-term relationships and an opportunity to engage with people over time, use Meetup.com, LinkedIn, and professional societies and associations to find regular meetups.

Professional Associations and Trade Groups — Joining professional associations can provide many excellent resources, and networking at local chapters is often a built-in benefit, as these meetings are also held on a regular basis.

Tapping Your Social Circle — What do you do for fun? Who’s in your social circle? Start with your friends, neighbors, and people in your community. It’s likely that someone has that friend of a friend who could know someone in a position to help you out.

Always Be Networking — Keeping an open mind and talking to people as people is key. You never know when the person you strike up a conversation with at the hotel bar will offer you the business deal of a lifetime.
Networking Online via Social Media

Almost everyone uses social media to some degree, especially those eager to move up in their career. As a professional networking tool, social media becomes more than a guilty pleasure; it is a necessity.

Serving two purposes, social media offers an accessible and almost universal resource for following up with people you’ve met, as well as new opportunities to find and engage with people who aren’t local.

If you live in an area with limited networking opportunities or your industry isn’t very large, online networking becomes a necessity. The power of streaming video technology makes it easier than ever to join digital meetup groups and forums for networking—all of which can offer the same benefits as in-person networking if properly cultivated.

Social media offers many opportunities to create and grow your network with people you already know, and meet new people through conversations, professional aspirations, shared interests, and more. Use your time spent online to better effect with these simple networking tips:

Follow up with Connection Requests – Follow up with people you’ve met with a connection request on LinkedIn. If you’ve been cultivating relationships and engaging with people actively at events, they’ll remember you and accept, providing an easy way to stay engaged.

Build Authority on LinkedIn – Joining LinkedIn groups and participating in industry- or role-specific discussions is an excellent way to engage and establish trust with professional communities. Keep your profile fully up to date as well, with a clear indication of what you’re interested in and how to contact you. Publishing on the LinkedIn Pulse writing platform can also help to generate exposure.

Diversify Business Profiles – Platforms such as Facebook or Twitter allow you to create separate professional accounts that can be curated to represent your business image. This makes it easier to protect your personal views and relationships while engaging with people via social media.

Comment on Articles You Read – Engage with influencers and their followers by leaving thoughtful comments that contribute to the conversation. Influencers are used to people asking them for something, so you need to rise above the noise by contributing helpful information.

Interact on Industry-Specific Forums – Websites that are devoted to your career path or industry and that have active forums are prime venues for online networking. By participating in conversations and contributing helpful and/or entertaining information, you can cultivate many professional contacts.
Overcoming Common Fears

Fear is natural in an unfamiliar setting. For those with social anxieties or who are more introverted by nature, stepping outside of their comfort zone to engage with perfect strangers can be difficult.

There are several things you can do, however, to make the process easier. By following a process that you practice and acclimate to over time, you can put yourself at ease and feel more natural in these settings.

Everyone has fears when leaving their comfort zone. To combat those fears and put yourself in a place of mental strength, here are six tips to keep in mind:

Posture: Strike a Power Pose – Posture not only makes an impression on the people you meet, it also has an impact on how you feel. Hunched over, arms across your stomach, and head down—you’re telling the world and yourself that you don’t want to be there. Stand up tall, shoulders back and hands at the ready. You’ll feel more confident in your power pose.

Smile! – Smiling can be difficult when you’re uncomfortable, but it can help put you at ease. A smile can improve your mood and make it easier to engage with people in a more proactive way.

Breathe Steadily and Deeply – When you get nervous, breathing is probably the last thing on your mind. But by focusing on it, you can reduce a lot of anxiety. Breathe steadily and deeply to relax your body and provide focus.

Research the Event and Attendees – One of the primary causes of fear when networking is going in unprepared. By knowing the event details and who is there, you can feel better prepared to trigger or respond to new conversations.

Ask Open-Ended Questions – Nothing is more awkward than the long pause that occurs after a simple “yes” or “no” answer. Ask open-ended questions that encourage explanation and engagement, especially in a group of people.

Be a Good Listener – People want to learn more about you, but they also want to talk about themselves. Be an active, engaged listener. Maintain eye contact, nod, and smile to show you are listening, and ask questions when appropriate.
Keeping Your Network Warm and Ready to Interact

Establishing connections with other professionals is only the first part of the process. After the initial contact, you need to stay engaged with them over time.

Participating in both offline and online communities where there’s an element of regularity can prevent your network from growing cold. Sometimes you’ll even become friends with your connections and form long-lasting relationships that aren’t just work-related. But every member of a community plays a different part, and some people will only come to an event once.

Having a follow-up system in place to ensure that you engage with those people regardless of how often they intend is important to building relationships over time.

When you hit it off with someone at a conference who lives on the other side of the country, and you only expect to see them once or twice a year, keep that connection warm. Here are some actions you can take to stay connected with your budding network:

- **Connect on Social Media** – Follow one another on social media and engage. Leave comments and like posts, to show that you’re paying attention.

- **Send a Personalized Email or Handwritten Thank-You Note** – Right after the event, follow up with that person on the things you discussed. Send an email that shows you recall the conversation and paid attention.

- **Reciprocate and Reach Out** – If one of your new colleagues contacted you first, reciprocate. Reach out, and don’t be shy about it. Sometimes you’ll get a response, and other times you won’t. Focus on the connections where there’s a lot of reciprocation and engagement.

- **Meet Up in Person When Traveling** – When traveling, review your connections and see who you will be near during your trip. Offer to get coffee together or grab lunch. Even if they’re not available, they’ll remember that you made the effort.
How to Create Your Next Opportunity

You should always be networking, looking for your next opportunity, and building relationships that will be mutually beneficial for years to come. Whether networking comes to you naturally or you have to work at it, make it a part of your daily schedule so you can benefit from it over time.

Sure, you might get lucky every now and then, but most opportunities are founded on weeks, months, or even years of hard work cultivating new relationships.

By building a strong, recurring habit that helps you build these relationships, you can create new opportunities for yourself for years to come.

Here are five things you should do this month to jump start your networking efforts and get more out of the time you spend interacting with people outside of the workplace:

Find a Local Networking Group – Tap into your local NAPW chapter, or use Meetup.com to find local networking groups and join them. This is the easiest way to ensure that you are constantly getting out and interacting with new people.

RSVP to 2–4 Events Per Month – Choose a realistic number of events based on your schedule, whether they’re once a week or once every two weeks. Put your name down and add the events to your calendar to increase the chances that you’ll attend.

Attend Those Meetups! – It’s easy to get busy or just not feel like attending on a given night, but the only way to build a habit of attending and to get over that initial anxiety is to do it regularly. Attend every meeting you RSVP’d to, and you’ll be astounded at how quickly you start to feel comfortable in the setting.

Create Relationships – Now is the time to start building relationships. By attending events with the same group on a regular basis, you’ll start interacting with new people and previous contacts alike, building stronger relationships over time.

Give Value – Networking is not a one-way street. Remember this every time you have a conversation. What can you offer the other person to make the interaction worth both their time and yours?
I’ve been attending many Power Networking events across the country, and the turnout has been incredible. The insights we hear from women who are actively engaged with their community are outstanding.

Directly from those events, I have six networking principles that I want to share with you! I know that networking and meeting new people can be intimidating for a lot of people. But take it from me—it’s really a cinch when you master the following principles:

1. **Plan Ahead** – You’re networking for a reason: to get a new job, meet a new client, and build your professional network. Keep your reason for networking in mind as you carefully choose your options based on the location and crowd that can best meet your needs.

2. **Be Your Own “Sasha Fierce”!** – If meeting a new person makes you nervous, create an alter ego to help you overcome your nerves. Beyoncé has Sasha Fierce. Develop your own special persona to help you get past your jitters.

3. **Just Say “Hi”** – A friendly greeting is the best opening to a networking session. Extend your hand, introduce yourself, and ask a question to break the ice. I find that easy ones work best, like “What brought you to the event today?” Or “How did you hear about NAPW?”

4. **Speak Up!** – Tell those you meet why you’re networking and what you hope to gain from the session: “I’m looking to transition to a career in HR. Where should I start?”

5. **Contact, Contact, Contact!** – Whether you share traditional business cards or electronically “AirDrop” your information, make sure you exchange contact details with everyone you meet, and be sure to follow up. Send the contacts you make a quick email a day or two later, and keep their needs in mind. Networking is not just about how others can help you; it’s also about what you can do to help them. Remember, one hand washes the other.

6. **Make Referrals!** – Networking is not about being selfish. There is no compliment greater than a referral. If you can’t benefit from the service your new connection provides but you know who can, make an introduction. Hopefully, they’ll return the favor and refer your work to your target audience as well.

**Now get out there and network like a “Star”!**
The International Association of Women (IAW) is a global in-person and online professional networking platform that provides nearly one million women with the forum, education, and services to thrive in an interconnected world.

IAW members have diverse backgrounds, beliefs, perspectives, and lifestyles, but with one common bond — their ability to succeed. Through over 100 local chapters and via in-person and virtual events, our community empowers each member to realize their dreams, acquire the connections and knowledge needed to rise, and helps them build better work–life integration and the confidence that is vital to lead.

Visit https://hubs.ly/H09BmsV0 to learn more and join today