

Business networking is a form of marketing communications

Last week, I attended the Women & Business: An Atlantic Exchange, which was an event showcasing women's business concerns organized by The Atlantic magazine. One of the segments included an interview with Melanie Whelan, CEO of SoulCycle, a boutique indoor cycling studio.

Ms. Whelan spoke at length about the SoulCycle culture and its business model. Soul Cycle concentrates on providing a special experience to its customers, where they feel part of a community. She said that SoulCycle has never advertised, instead relying on satisfied users to become brand ambassadors, to discuss their positive experience with friends and in social media, promoting the company. In this way, SoulCycle has grown from being a one-of studio on the Upper West Side of New York to having several studios in many large metropolitan areas.

Ms. Whelan offered several interesting insights about her company's corporate culture, brand experience and market growth, and it's worth watching her presentation:

Word-of-mouth marketing

Over and over, you hear businesses claim that their best marketing is word-of-mouth and/or referrals. In SoulCycle's case, it seems that word-of-mouth marketing has paid off in spades.

And yet, at this very forum, which was intended both to help women entrepreneurs get some solid information and to network with each other, I saw first hand how hard it is for most people to network and connect with each other.

Networking can be hard for some

There were women who seemed very shy, and couldn't seem to even smile or even look at strangers.

There was a woman with bad body odor. Whether or not she was aware of the issue, I am not sure, but I would think many people steered clear of her.

There was a woman, standing next to me at the buffet line, who barely acknowledged an ice breaker comment I made. Even after being given an easy way to chat, she refused to do so. I am not sure if it was lack of interest or shyness or perhaps she was just hungry.

Then there was the socially awkward woman I sat down next to inside the auditorium. She dropped her papers and I picked them up and handed them to her, and she didn't even acknowledge me or thank me. She then started taking notes off my printed agenda, without so much as a word or an "excuse me, but may I see your agenda." And even worse, she kept falling asleep and leaning on me. Seriously.

But networking is an essential business skill

Then there was a woman who smiled, shook hands and introduced herself, making it easy to converse. She understood the power of networking. As she said to me, networking isn't about closing a sale, but rather about meeting people who will remember you and perhaps refer to you later on when a need arises for them or in their circle.

Networking is the most basic form of marketing communications. It's your opportunity to introduce yourself and your business on a personal, one-to-one level. It is an essential part of business and professional development.

It's not easy for most folks, myself included, to walk into a room full of strangers and just chat it up. But there are ways to make it less intimidating.

Think quality versus quantity. You don't have to meet everyone in the room. If you meet one or two people, and get to know them, you will be doing well.

Think about what you do and how to best communicate it. It's easy to get stuck in thinking everybody understands what you do, but chances are good that they won't. Think of a simple way of introducing yourself and your business, and that allows for questions to follow.

Understand that other people in the room are just as uncomfortable as you are. A smile goes a long way in making people relax.

If you are still having trouble connecting, perhaps you should consider some outside help. Perhaps you can hire a business coach to help you refine your approach and to give you pointers.

How do you network? What works best for you? Please share in the comments.

7 actions that will give your event more mileage

Having attended a couple of professional development events in the last few weeks, I noticed that the organizers did little to guarantee people would a) enjoy the event and b) talk about the event (and by extension, the organizing group).

Event planning is a skill, and it is not easy. Too many volunteers and committee members think all they need to do is

choose a date, book the space, order food and drink, and publicize the event. But those are the basics. To get more mileage from an event both for the attendees and for the presenting organization, you need to do more.

Here are seven actions that will help you get more mileage from your next event.

1. Designate volunteers to be organizational ambassadors/greeters. You will need more than the person greeting attendees at the door. These volunteers, who should be good representatives of your organization, will welcome people to the event and make sure they know where everything is located (food, restrooms, seats, etc.). But more so, ambassadors should introduce attendees to each other.

Why this gives you more mileage: Your attendees will feel welcomed. They will meet at least one person (the ambassador). This makes your organization look welcoming and more enticing to non-members.

2. Prep your speaker(s) and/or presenter(s). Make sure everybody knows what to say so there is no pointless repetition. Divide up introductions appropriately. Make sure announcements and other information will be shared.

Why this gives you more mileage: Messaging is important and gives attendees useful information. By prepping your speakers, you are ensuring your organization looks professional.

3. Use social media. Invite your attendees to tweet about the event (and give them a hashtag) or post summaries to their blogs and other social media.

Why this gives you more mileage: Social media amplifies. Enough said.

4. Have someone monitor social media during and after the event. Make sure to respond to any questions or comments

(especially if there is a problem—maybe the AC is not working or the Wi-Fi is spotty). Retweet and publicize your attendees posts.

Why this gives you more mileage: Again, it amplifies, but it also shows your organization is responsive and embraces social media.

5. Be sure to incorporate time for Q&A, and make it organized. Q&A shouldn't be an afterthought, and it shouldn't be a free for all. Organizers should make sure to designate a time for questions. Whether you decide to have a microphone for the audience or take questions via social media, you should make it easy for people to interact with your presenters.

Why this gives you more mileage: Your audience will get more clarity on issues and, again, it makes your organization look responsive.

6. Create a recap of the event and post it to your blog/website and your social media networks. The recap of the event could include a summary of the presentation, contact information for the presenters, and photos of the event (and if you post photos on Facebook, people could tag themselves).

Why this gives you more mileage: Your recap is now shareable content for your website, blog and/or newsletter. Attendees will have something to reference if they want to talk about the event.

7. Email all attendees a thank you and evaluation survey shortly after the event. You may also include a link to your recap (see above).

Why this gives your more mileage: You will have yet another opportunity to interact with your attendees while getting useful feedback. You could even have an offer for new members or discounts to future events.

What would you add? What has been your experience when attending professional development events?

What's the goal behind the AMADC's \$45 happy hour?

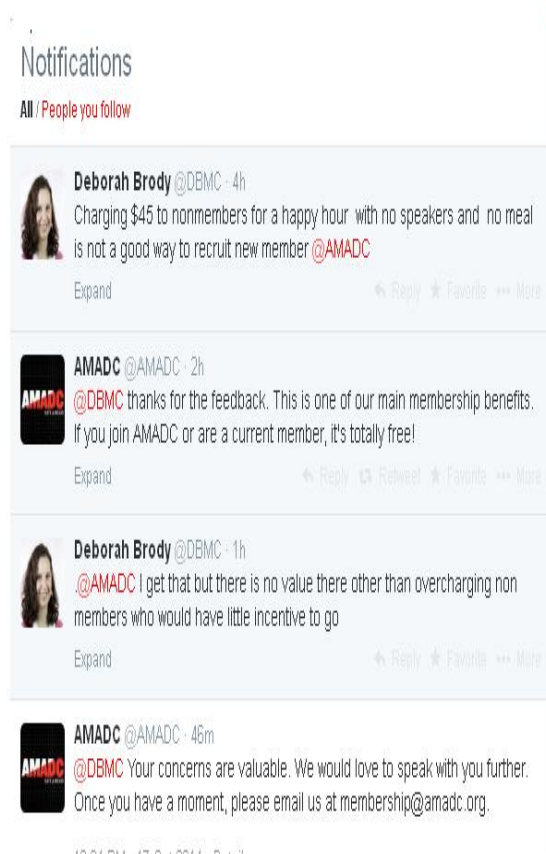
Note: AMADC is the Washington, DC chapter of the American Marketing Association (AMA) , which is a membership organization with chapters around the country. I am not a member of the AMA or AMADC, although I have attended its events in the past.

Last Friday, the AMADC tweeted about its upcoming happy hour (or AMA Networking Events as they call them) at a DC restaurant. I clicked on the link and found out that to attend the happy hour, non-members must pay \$45 while members can attend free. According to what I saw, the happy hour/networking event is a chance to mingle with other people. This is a description from the AMADC website:

AMADC Networking Events are the place to get dialed into the DC marketing community. Make alliances for your business, find your next great employee, get active in the AMA, get career advice or maybe get your next job. Be sure to bring a ton of business cards, you are going to need them

There is no program, no speaker and at least from what I can see, no food or drink included in the price of admission. Just a chance to meet people (maybe).

Here's my conversation with AMADC on Twitter:



According to the @AMADC response above, the free happy hour for members is a “main benefit of membership.” This however, is not even mentioned in the AMADC’s website membership benefits page.

(Annual membership in AMADC is \$285, of which \$220 is for

national dues and \$65 for chapter dues.)

So, what is the marketing/strategic goal for the AMADC happy hours? Is the goal to reach non-members and show them value?

Are these happy hours simply membership perks? If so, fine. If I am understanding this correctly, members get to feel as though they are “saving” \$45 for each “networking event.

Here’s a question though: members don’t have to pay extra to attend. And while this may be a benefit of membership, just how valuable is it? *Remember cost is not equivalent to value.*

But, if these happy hours/networking events are also a chance to reach out to non-members and perhaps even to recruit new members, then charging \$45 is not accomplishing that goal. I can tell you that from experience, specifically with the AMADC.

When I first moved to DC nearly ten years ago, I attended one of the AMADC happy hours at a bar downtown. The cost then was \$25 (why the nearly 100% increase is another question). I got to the bar, where I knew nobody. There was a section reserved for the AMA (right off the main bar, and not even clearly marked off). They offered no snacks, or drinks (or even discount drinks other than the regular happy hour stuff). There were no name tags. Nobody offered to act as an AMA ambassador and welcome people. I tried talking to a couple of people but having a conversation over the bar’s loud background noise was near impossible. In short, it was a waste of time and money. I could’ve just gone to the bar on my own, ordered a beer, sat right next to the AMA DC section, and gotten as much out of it while saving \$25.

Is the AMADC’s goal to be in line with other organizations in town?

Meanwhile, the other membership organizations in town also host monthly happy hours, however, this charge of \$45 for a

happy hour is the highest I have seen. For example, IABCDC does not charge for its happy hours. Everyone pays for what they consume. Various communications meetups such as DC PR Flacks don't charge either. The PRSA-NCC charges everyone for its PRO Net happy hours (\$10 for members and \$15 for non-members) but the fee includes a free drink and appetizers.

Is the goal to encourage networking among members?

Other organizations charge between \$35 and \$65 for non-members to attend chapter meetings, professional development events or luncheons/dinners. In fact, AMADC charges \$50 to non-members and \$30 for members for its professional development events. Bear in mind that at a professional development event or at a meal, people are getting a tangible benefit.

Why would networking be considered a more important benefit than professional development? Why not make professional development the perk of membership?

Is the AMADC's goal to make money off networking events?

Obviously, when there is a cost involved for the organization (the meal, the room rental, etc.), there is a reason to charge both members and non-members. Many organizations use sponsorships to defray the overhead costs, and so that they can offer discounts to their members. For the upcoming AMADC happy hour, a local organization is sponsoring the event. Since people have to pay for their drinks and food, there is no cost to the AMADC other than a room rental or guarantee fee, which I assume is being covered by the sponsorship. The non-member fee would seem to be a money-maker.

Is the goal to show non-members what they would save?

Perhaps the AMADC is imagining a scenario where a non-member signs up for this event, has a wonderful time and makes a lot of new contacts, and figures that if he or she signs up for membership, he/she could go to this events "for free" thus

“saving” \$45.

So what are the AMADC’s goals?

I don’t know and I can’t tell what the AMADC’s goals are. It’s not clear to me what it is aiming to accomplish by charging so much for a happy hour. In my opinion, there is little value to a happy hour and very little reason to spend \$45 to attend one. Yes, I understand there is a networking opportunity. But as mentioned above, there are many other free and lower cost opportunities in town. Plus, going to a happy hour at a loud bar is not necessarily the best way to network.

What do you think? Would you pay this fee? Why or why not?

Is the chamber of commerce model still viable?

As I mentioned in the last post, I am not a member of my local chamber of commerce, and never have been. I am not alone. According to reporting in the Washington Business Journal (which I can’t link to here because it is behind a paywall), membership is dwindling at the chambers of commerce in the Washington metro region.

Almost all of the DC metro local chambers have experienced a drop in members over the past ten years. The D.C. Chamber lost 15.7%, Montgomery County lost 17.8% and Fairfax lost a jaw-dropping 54.9%. However, the chambers haven’t experienced a drop in revenue, since they have increased dues and other income-generating programs.

One of the reasons I haven't joined a chamber is because it is expensive and I feel there is little benefit. After all, there are plenty lower-cost to no-cost alternatives for networking purposes, not the least of is on social media. The other reason is that I find most chambers attract small businesses that may not have the budget for the marketing services I provide.

I would guess that the ease of using Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook to connect with folks, and then maintain the relationship is behind the remarkable drop in membership for the chambers. Why pay dues when you can easily network with people who share your interests or whom fit other parameters like work in a certain industry, live in a geographic area and others.

Perhaps the chamber model is no longer suited to our Internet-driven world. We no longer need the chamber membership guides to find people or services. We can look up services on any number of sites, like Yelp, which may even have ratings. We certainly don't need chamber networking events to meet people in person. One remarkable and low cost alternative is Meet Up. Meet Up hosts many groups of local people who share an interest, which can be as narrowly or as broadly focused as you like.

Do you think chambers of commerce will survive another ten years? I'd like to know if you are a member of chamber of commerce. Why or why not? Please tell me in the comments.

How to make a bad impression

In the past few weeks, I have been flat-out amazed at how some people act in business/networking situations. They've not made

a good impression.

Here's how you too can make a bad impression:

1. **Have a limp handshake (bonus points if clammy and sweaty too).** The other day I met the director of a local chamber of commerce. She introduced herself and gave me the limpest handshake I can remember. I wanted to say to her that she needed to work on a firm handshake, instead, I shuddered inwardly. Limp handshakes communicate lack of conviction and being tentative. And also, yuck.

2. **Don't introduce yourself.** I was at a small lunch gathering and a guy joined us late. He sat down and didn't bother to say his name or what his business was. I didn't find out until the end when he gave me his business card. Very few people require no introduction and generally, they don't go to small business gatherings. To me, not introducing yourself shows you are not aware of other people.

3. **Be late.** At the same lunch gathering mentioned above, where I was a first-timer, the organizer showed up more than 15 minutes late. Being late for a meeting you organized is inexcusable. Being late in general just shows a disregard for others.

4. **Don't respond.** Say we met at an event, and we exchange business cards, and we talk about having coffee soon, and then I send you an email (and then another) and I don't hear back from you. Yeah. I get it. You don't want to have coffee. That's OK, but if in the future you change your mind, you've left me with a really bad impression. (This one also applies to social media. Check your @ replies on Twitter. Is someone asking you a question? Perhaps you should answer it).

5. **Attack the other person.** The other day I met a business owner who is a big fan of the chamber of commerce. I am not since I don't usually find my target audience there. When she asked me if I was a member of her chamber, I explained why I

am not. She got defensive and immediately began attacking me. She wasn't polite or constructive. She was just mean and putting me down.

Here's a few more:

- Be disinterested in other people or the topic being discussed.
- Dress inappropriately.
- Be dismissive.
- Don't pay attention and then ask a question that has already been answered.
- Be negative.
- Interrupt. Repeatedly.
- Tell inappropriate (racist, sexist, etc.) jokes or stories. (Oh, it happens. All the time.)

Some people will only try to make a good impression with people they are trying to impress and ignore everyone else. That's a guaranteed way to make a really bad impression (most everyone despises a brown-noser).

If you don't care about how you come across, then you should also not be surprised if you are not doing well in your business. Impressions matter. You only have one chance to make a good first impression, but you have multiple chances to make a bad impression.

Have you dealt with these behaviors? What would you add?

3 kinds of networking and only 1 works

A few days ago, I got an email from a “friend” asking me to attend one of those sales parties masquerading as a wine and cheese with friends. This person has had no interaction with me in a couple of years. Why would she think I would be interested in helping her out and attending her “party?”

Have you experienced this? Someone reaches out to you when she or he needs something from you. Not before and not after. This person doesn't understand how networking works.



Girl Scout Friendship
Circlly by Kimberly K on
Flickr

Basically, there are three kinds of networking:

1. Networking rarely or not at all. You have an incomplete LinkedIn profile (bonus points if it is missing a photograph), you have never posted anything on Twitter or even Facebook, and you rarely, if ever, attend networking events in person.

2. Networking only when you need something. You lost your job, and you had not been networking at all. Suddenly, you need

connections. You start networking like crazy. Or, your kid is selling cookies for a fundraiser, so you hit up all your Facebook friends for support even though you never so much as like a post or wish anybody happy birthday. (Or, like my “friend” above, you need to make some extra money for the holidays.)

3. Networking all the time. You are conscious about keeping up with people. You actively attend events and maybe even participate in planning them. You are active in social media, and post updates to LinkedIn frequently (but not with annoying frequency). You Tweet and you connect via Facebook. You share stuff your connections post.

Guess which one works the best...yes, that would be number 3, always networking.

Networks are about relationships and relationships take time and nurturing. The only way to build a strong network is to invest time and effort. Whether you do it in person or on social media, you have to devote energy to it.

If you don't build relationships at all, well then you don't have any. If you haven't nurtured your relationships, why do you expect those people to help you?

The lesson here is simple. Nurture your network before you need it. Don't abandon it, ever.

Are you aiming for quantity

or quality (or both)?

On LinkedIn this morning, I saw that one of my connections (whom, by the way, I have never met in person) was asking her network how many connections were they aiming for this year. It got me to thinking whether networking should be a numbers game (quantity).

We've all heard of SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely). In that sense, to have a SMART networking goal, you would indeed have a number, as this would make it measurable.

So say you decide you want to make 25 new connections this year, and you only make 15, have you failed at your goal? What if from those 15 connections, you got valuable advice, a job lead and a new best friend?

Can you measure networking by numbers? I don't think you can, and I don't think you should.

As a business owner, I attend my fair share of networking events. I am not someone who works the room, making sure to shake everybody's hand. Instead, I generally end up talking to one or two people more in depth. I understand the value in having a wide network, but I would rather get there more slowly.

If people know who I am because we've had several conversations in person, isn't that better than trying to expand a network by sending a bunch of blind invitations "people you may know?"

LinkedIn is a great tool and as such, many people, such as the person I referenced at the beginning of the post, tend to abuse it. Too many people think networking is all about quantity regardless of quality. In fact, successful networking is both a quantity and a quality proposition.

What are your thoughts? What is your networking advice?

How to make networking events a better marketing opportunity

Everybody goes to networking events at one point or another. Some go because they feel they have to and others go because they love to network. The bottom line is that networking is an integral part of marketing, both personal and business. Opportunities always stem from personal relationships and networking is just the path to extend and strengthen your personal relationships.

December is probably the prime networking month as there are all sorts of holiday parties and end of year ceremonies. But if you don't think about your networking, all you will end up doing is wasting time (and money).



Handshake by B.T. Indrelunas on Flickr

The inspiration for this post was a woman I “met” at a party last week. I didn’t actually meet her because she was a walking networking don’t. She approached me and a friend, greeted us, but didn’t introduce herself. She babbled about the holidays (actually told us about her Thanksgiving dinner), and then said she wanted to get food, and turned around and left. Some time later, she sat down next to me and did not even try to make conversation. She wandered around the party aimlessly. Someone told me she was job-hunting. My impression was that she was slightly unhinged, and had no idea of how to connect with people.

Don’t be like that woman! You can make networking events a good marketing tool for yourself or your business if you follow some dos and don’ts.

Do this:

Have an objective in mind. You should ask yourself what you would like to get out of this event.

Work on your introduction. Have a short but complete overview of who you are, something like: Hi, my name is Jane Doe, and I am a graphic designer at XZ agency, an Anytown-based

advertising agency that specializes in the tech industry.

Perfect your handshake, smile and body language. A strong but not bone crushing grip, a nice smile and an open stance will help make you more likeable.

Think about your appearance. Match your dress to the occasion. If it's a holiday party, be festive. If it is a morning business meeting, then dress in your business best!

Be interested in the other person. Ask questions and be genuinely interested in the answers.

Have business cards at the ready. Yes, I know people can Google you and phone tap you and whatever, but exchanging business cards is a tangible way to initiate contact.

Follow up. Make sure to send an email to people you have met soon after the event to help establish the connection. You may even suggest going to coffee or lunch and use the opportunity to get to know the person.

But don't do this:

Hand out business cards indiscriminately. Exchange cards with someone only after you have spoken.

Go for quantity. Some people feel they must work the room and meet everyone. I believe that quality is better than quantity, that is, it is better to meet a couple of people who will remember who you are, than a whole bunch of people than can't place you.

Have a bad handshake. This includes the limp handshake, the overly strong handshake, the clammy handshake, and one that I experienced last week, the calloused, rough skin on the hand shake (use moisturizer!!!).

Be overly self-deprecating. Don't diminish your accomplishments by letting your insecurity shine through.

Act weird. Some people take pride in marching to the beat of a different drummer, and that is fine. But. There is personality and then there is weirdness. Some people (like the woman I mentioned above) don't pick up on social cues. Or then there was the guy who went to the holiday party in a kilt. Using a kilt is limited to the following occasions: when you are a schoolgirl in uniform, at your family's Scottish ancestral ceremony or it is Halloween. You don't want to get attention for the wrong reasons.

Happy networking this holiday season. You may just be a party away from meeting your next employer, project or friend!

What are your networking dos and don'ts?

To network or not to network, that is a question

Here it is, mid-March (Pi Day today because it is 3.14) and I haven't been to a single networking event this year. Not a one. I did get to a panel presentation yesterday, but that wasn't a networking event.

Now, I believe in networking and in networking events. It's important to meet people in person, and form relationships. It's good to get out. **So the question is not whether to network but where and how.**

Here are some factors in deciding:

Who is going. Is there a good chance that you will meet prospective clients, or good resources or just fun people? Is

it going to be lots of people you already know? Will it give you a chance to reconnect? You should have a goal in mind when networking. If not, you are just attending an event.

Where and when is it. Is it convenient to attend this event? Will there be parking if I have to drive or is it near a Metro stop? How long will it take to get there? Is it at the crack of dawn or in the evening?

Cost. Some events are free and those you can decide on based on the two factors above, but some events are costly. For example, I got an event invitation for something that is \$49. And it is a breakfast presentation. To me, that is a lot of \$\$\$. Will the cost cover anything other than networking—a presentation or a meal? There's one group I know that gives a percentage of the cost to charity, so there is a feel-good/do-good aspect to paying.

Plenty of notice/time to RSVP. Sometimes you don't have enough notice (as I am writing this I got an invitation for something tomorrow night—sorry, I already committed to something else). Sometimes you have to RSVP far in advance.

What are your reasons to attend or not attend an event? I would love to hear what makes it or breaks it for you in the comments.

**Just because you are doing
the hiring doesn't mean you**

don't have to market yourself

Have you ever been to a job interview where you are not encouraged to ask questions? Have you been offered a job where you don't ask about benefits, salary or vacation/sick day policy? I would bet that if you went to a job interview and you did not meet who you would be working for, and where, and if the interviewer did not tell you a bit about the hiring organization, you would be a bit hesitant about it being a good fit for you.

Some organizations seem to believe that if they are deigning to hire someone—be it an employee or a consultant or an agency or any type of service—they don't need to market themselves. Potential hires should just be excited that someone is offering to consider them or their services.

Companies that care about providing a good work environment are proud to let the world know about it. They even use it as a differentiator. You have probably seen organizations that tout that they were selected as a top employer for working moms, or most socially responsible organization and so forth.

There are many organizations out there, and if you are in marketing, you must differentiate yourself from everyone else. Even if you are “just hiring.”

Yesterday, I got the following email (identity is concealed):

Subject: What type of work do you do?

Body: Just starting the process to see if we want to bring in a firm as a consultant on several projects. What type of work does your firm do? Who/what are your clients?

[name]

Marketing Manager

[COMPANY NAME]

[phone/fax/email/address]

This marketing manager is not managing to market herself at all. What does her company do? What types of projects is she interested in? Why would I want to answer her? (Not to mention that you can find answers to all these questions right here on my website.)

Marketing is about making an impression. Even if you are doing the hiring does not mean you don't have to impress your potential hiree about what a good/special/professional company you are. Perhaps you are known for paying well, or paying on time, or being responsive, or having employees that have been there for decades. Whatever it is, it is what makes your organization special and different from other organizations.