

# A Guide to Business Networking

Business Information Factsheet

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## Introduction

Networking provides an opportunity for business owners to exchange ideas and information with other traders and business people from their local area or business sector. It also offers an opportunity to meet potential clients, suppliers and business partners. Building relationships with other business people in this way is also an important activity for every business owner's personal development.

This factsheet outlines the various types of business networks that are available and explains how to get the most out of networking opportunities.

## What are the benefits of networking?

For many people, the ultimate purpose of networking is to generate new business by finding potential new business partners and obtaining word-of-mouth referrals, recommendations and introductions. However, networking can also help to:

- Share or learn about new ideas.
- Find out what competitors are up to.
- Gather general or specific industry information.
- Get help with problems from people with appropriate knowledge and experience.
- Keep up to date with new industry developments, regulations and policies.
- Form relationships with potential partners.

## Finding suitable networks

### Local networks

- Local chambers of commerce run local business events and provide networking opportunities. Go to [www.britishchambers.org.uk](http://www.britishchambers.org.uk) for contact details. There is also a free online directory of local business networking clubs and groups at [www.networkingclubs.co.uk](http://www.networkingclubs.co.uk).
- Referral networks such as the BRX ([www.brxnet.co.uk](http://www.brxnet.co.uk)) and BNI ([www.bni.co.uk](http://www.bni.co.uk)) can also be effective ways of making contacts. These organisations operate on a local level, with different 'chapters'. Only one local business person from each trade or sector is allowed to join a particular local chapter.

- Some referral networks provide networking opportunities for specific business groups. For example, the Women in Business Network ([www.wibn.co.uk](http://www.wibn.co.uk)) holds regular local meetings for business women.

## Sector networks

- Trade associations and professional bodies can provide details of networks specifically for a particular sector. Go to [www.taforum.org/Members](http://www.taforum.org/Members) for a directory of UK trade associations.
- Business exhibitions and trade fairs provide an opportunity to showcase products and services. However, simply attending exhibitions can provide useful networking opportunities with potential customers, suppliers and other useful contacts. Exhibition organisers are able to provide a list of exhibitors in advance to help identify specific organisations or people to approach. See [www.exhibitions.co.uk/find-an-event](http://www.exhibitions.co.uk/find-an-event) for a directory of trade fairs and shows in the UK.

## Online networks

- There are a number of business-oriented online networks available. Many are free to join for a basic membership package. Examples include:
  - LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)), Ryze ([www.ryze.com](http://www.ryze.com)) and XING ([www.xing.com](http://www.xing.com)), which all enable members to build their own online network of business contacts.
  - 4Networking ([www.4networking.biz](http://www.4networking.biz)), which runs regular breakfast networking events across the UK and allows members to connect online.
  - Sunzu ([www.sunzu.com](http://www.sunzu.com)), which is an online network that provides opportunities to learn, share information and trade with other business people.
- Blogs and discussion forums are also useful for communicating with other business people online and for keeping up to date with key issues affecting a particular sector.
- Social networking platforms such as Twitter ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)) and Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)) can also be used for online business networking. They help people to find information about your business and are useful for finding new business contacts or partnerships.

## Informal networking

There are also many informal opportunities for meeting business contacts, for example:

- While travelling.
- During conferences and training courses.
- At parties and sporting events.

It can be useful to keep a supply of business cards handy all times for when an informal networking opportunity presents itself.

## Effective networking

There are a number of common traits among business people who are effective networkers:

- They treat everyone equally and with respect.
- They are good listeners.
- They demonstrate empathy.
- They are friendly and approachable.
- They are interested in other people.

In addition to good listening and verbal communication skills, it is important to be able to react appropriately to different kinds of situations and emotional moods. These skills can all be developed with practice.

Networking is often the start of forming new business relationships and alliances. This can take a number of months, so it is important to have a plan for when and how to follow up with new contacts to nurture and develop the relationship.

## Hints and tips

- Always follow up conversations or introductions later and never promise something that can't be delivered.
- When collecting business cards, have a plan for maintaining contact with people in order to encourage further meetings or invitations to events.
- Networking is reciprocal so it is as much about giving and sharing contacts and referrals as receiving them.

## Further information

BIF068 A Checklist for Exhibiting at Trade Fairs and Exhibitions  
BIF345 A Guide to Entertaining Clients and Staff

## Useful contacts

The British Chambers of Commerce has an online directory of local chambers, which run regular networking events for business owners.

Website: [www.britishchambers.org.uk](http://www.britishchambers.org.uk)

Networkingclubs.co.uk is an online directory of business networking clubs and groups.

Website: [www.networkingclubs.co.uk](http://www.networkingclubs.co.uk)

The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) is membership organisation representing small business owners in the UK. It provides a range of services, including networking events for members.

Website: [www.fsb.org.uk/benefits/support/regional-networking-events](http://www.fsb.org.uk/benefits/support/regional-networking-events)

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