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## NETWORKING

First things first, networking is not just a social event that occurs after you have listened to a speaker drone on about some thing or other, with a chance to catch up with friends and colleagues whilst grabbing your share of the food and drink that is on offer.

In its simplest form - Networking is an opportunity to learn from as many people as you can in the time that is available to you. Now I don't mean, that it is a chance to have a good gossip and listen to muckraking and rumours, and if you do find yourself in a group of people intent on doing just that, make your excuses and find someone else to talk to. Networking should be an honest exchange of ideas and opportunities of mutual benefit. So whilst Networking is an opportunity to learn from other people, remember that others will want to learn from you, so be prepared to speak as well as listen.

Of course, as with all gatherings, it is wise to understand some of the unwritten rules.

Know what you want to get from the networking opportunity. If you think that Networking is all about "who you know" then I would suggest that you are mistaken. Yes, who you know is important, but what is more valuable in the long run is "who knows you". Are you going to be remembered for the right reasons?

Word of mouth is still the most powerful marketing tool there is, or ever will be. Use it wisely and people will do business with you, or refer business to you, endorse you and your products, open business and job opportunities that you had not even dreamt of - once they get to know you. However, just as positive recommendations can open up new opportunities, so negative comments, gossip and people talking about you and what you get up to will harm you and your chances to get on in your chosen industry.

Do not abuse your hosts' hospitality, drink too much, eat all the food, speak too loudly, dominate every conversation, or stick like a limpet to the guest speaker. If your one aim is to have a "good time" and meet with friends and have a drink, I would suggest that you go to another venue because you will learn little or nothing of value and importance.

Take business cards with you, and be prepared to hand them out. If you don't have a job and a business card to give out, consider getting some personal ones made. At the very least make sure you get the business card from those people you have been speaking to. Remember that the person who you were speaking to may not have any jobs on offer, but he or she may know of someone who has, so follow up with all your contacts as soon as possible.

Networking is like selling and marketing. You are your own marketing tool, and like all good sales people they know when to follow up, and they know when to back off and find another prospect. And so must you. Do not fall into the trap of spending the entire evening with one person, or a small group of people you already know. Step outside your comfort zone and go and say hello to someone you don't know, after all who knows what opportunities will come from the meeting.

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