

THE LOST ART OF NETWORKING

By **Bill Smith, APR**

Networking has always been a hallmark of successful businesses. But at many organizations today, it's a lost art.

I spoke with Whitney Taylor, president of Whitney Inc., a professional services firm based in Los Angeles that provides business development strategy, marketing/communications, PR/outreach, and government relations services. She is well-known throughout the parking industry as a networker extraordinaire and can often be found at parking, business, and government networking groups and events.

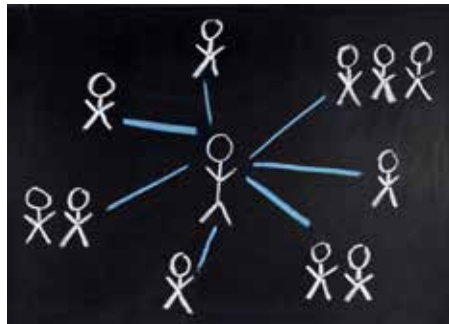
According to Taylor, "Organizations tend to overlook the need to maintain and grow their networks on an ongoing and consistent basis. Many companies think they can begin building a relationship when a need arises. Wrong! Network before there is a need! It's much harder to connect with someone as a customer or partner when you are still trying to get to know him. Effective networking allows you to get to know people before you work together."

Unfortunately, many organizations don't place a premium on networking, and it can become an afterthought, getting lost in the shuffle of day-to-day operations. Ironically, the advent of social media as a marketing and business development tool may be contributing to the trend of diminishing face-to-face marketing. It can be tempting for parking professionals to focus solely on electronic networking. Why not? You never have to leave your desk to connect with other professionals, prospective customers, or partners.

Don't do it. Abandoning face-to-face networking is a mistake.

Building Relationships

"Building relationships is often undervalued," says Taylor. "This is a relationship, not an acquaintance. You need to treat it like a real relationship, getting to know people personally and learning what's important to them. Really getting to know people puts you in a position of being able to provide real value to the relationship."



"A relationship isn't just a handshake and a drink," continues Taylor. "It's showing, rather than just telling, people that you can deliver and that they can trust you."

So, how do you build your network? According to Taylor, it depends on what type of organization you represent and what type of outreach is needed. For example, if your company is struggling with new business

success or looking to expand into a new vertical, your networking efforts should be geared toward reaching the decision-makers in the verticals into which you hope to expand. Learn their needs and wants. You need to know which decision-makers will be important to your organization in the months and years ahead and solidify those relationships rather than trying to build them from scratch when you are seeking their business.

There are plenty of opportunities to network within the parking industry as well as in vertical industries your organization may serve. Local affiliated branches of national industry organizations often offer annual conferences and trade shows, business meetings, and committees in which to participate. Likewise, local business groups typically have regularly scheduled meetings and networking happy hours

Saying Hello

According to Taylor, although it may seem intimidating to walk into a room of strangers and introduce yourself to people, it's really not that difficult. "Remember," Taylor says, "everyone feels just as awkward as you do. They might even appreciate having you break the ice."

But it's important to remember that networking doesn't end when you leave the event. In fact, that's just the beginning. You need to stay in touch with the people you connect with and cultivate relationships with them. Like any relationship, it needs to be nurtured.

Taylor offers this parting wisdom: "Follow up, follow up, follow up! We get business cards everywhere, all the time. If you aren't following up and getting to really know people, you are just wasting your time." **P**



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