The High Trust Advisor Series: The High Trust Networker

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The High Trust Networker

How to Get Access to and the Attention of High Value Prospects and Key Internal Stakeholders

Being perceived as wanting to 'sell' or 'pitch' a product, a service or a project proposal often creates a 'perceived threat' in the mind of potential decision-makers and valuable contacts.

It is therefore important to create a very favourable first impression and so reduce the degree of resistance that we may potentially get from prospective internal or external decision-makers.

We want to make sure that we create a safe and non-threatening impression right from the very start of a relationship – and start to build a compelling 'personal brand' (what people say about us when we are no longer in the room). This is important, as good business is built on permission and not on intrusion.

By far the most effective way, in my experience, of creating valuable and qualified business development and influential contacts is personal contact networking.

Therefore for experts who wish to be powerful and compelling influencers, today networking is not just an option, it is a professional requirement.

Why? Because in a world that is moving from old style command and control and expertise-based models of business development and leadership to ones where collaboration is the key to success – one's width and depth of contacts through your personal and professional network is a valuable asset.

It is increasingly recognised that the people who can leverage relationships are the ones who wield greater power in a world where information and access is critical.

Proactive networking can provide us with profile, position, credibility, market knowledge and the many other benefits of being able to work comfortably and confidently within a room full of other professionals, key stakeholders, clients and decision-makers.

However having to 'work the room' can be an uncomfortable, fearful and even resentful feeling for many of us.

Like the negative stereotypical image of 'the sales person' we often associate 'good networkers' with brash, self-confident people, who can handle any rejection, muscle themselves in anywhere and take over a conversation to suit their own ends - people that are not nice to be around.

Most normal people would rather hug the wall, cradling our coffees until we have waited the allotted time and can mercifully escape from this room of people who all seem to know each other.

However professional networking is about strategy, and fortunately, everyone can learn the strategy and the good news for many experts is that introverts - and not extroverts - make the best networkers. Why? Because networking is all about the other person and not us.

The first thing in networking is to understand that networking is not about ‘selling’ or pitching our company’s offerings or our career wonderful achievements and the second is to understand that it’s about asking permission.

As I’ve already said networking is not about us, it’s always about the other person and a good networker spends time asking questions and actively listening to what the other person has to say.

Not only that - but they will have reached this stage by having first gotten the person’s permission to talk with them.

So what are the steps that get us speaking with not just anyone but the right person, the perfect decision-maker for our business or career influence needs?

1. Choose the Correct Event:

By this I mean select the event that is most appropriate to the profile of the decision-makers that we want to meet.

Let me ask a question. Where is the best place to meet your decision-makers? Answer…at their own events! Just go to where they naturally gather to be together. Seminars, conferences, lunches, dinners etc.

With this basic understanding we can then start to choose the networking events we attend based on profiling or niching our decision-makers.

By profiling our existing contacts and dividing them into categories we can start to identify which contacts provide us with the most business opportunities.

Then it is a simple matter of identifying their professional associations, their suppliers associations, technical conferences or indeed corporate events - in fact anywhere they are likely to gather for reasons other than being ‘sold to’ by us.

For example, I worked with a well-known international accounting firm and one partner, using this simple niching exercise discovered 26 additional places where her ideal decision-maker profiles met. That's 26 new opportunities where she and her team could access their prospects and renew existing relationships.

However if we really want to excel at networking and establish as eclectic a network as possible my credo is simple "wherever two or more are gathered together…there also shall I be".

Accept invitations to all events – plan them like a meeting and use them as tools to expand your network of contacts, decision-makers, referrers and influencers.

2. Target the People We Wish to See:

The more specific we are about who we want to meet when networking the more successful we can be.

Plan out how many people we wish to meet (it's often best to go with a target of at least three new contacts per event). We can even plan to meet specific people who we know are at the event because of their value to us.

Ideally get the delegate list in advance from the event organiser - or get the attendee list when you get there.

With the delegate list secured before we attend the event we can now target specific contacts and then perhaps research them first on their website, or set a Google Alert for information about their company or check LinkedIn which provides us with a photo and something about their background

This can also help identify if we have any common connections or links who might provide us with an introduction.

…and it's not stalking ...its research!

3. Learn the Psychology of Networking

Conferences and seminars aren't just a big mass of people. Next time we attend an event we should take time to study the room before we launch ourselves into the fray.

We'll then see that people arrange themselves in three distinct ways.

A. The Individual

B. The Open Group

C. The Closed Group.

A. The Individual

They will be just like us, on the edge looking for a way in.

They're wondering if they'll ever meet someone and how to go about it. They really want to connect with someone so if you make an effort to connect with them you will be welcomed with open arms. Remember why people come to networking events…to network!

To be accepted is the highest of human values. We are herd animals. So if we offer a chance to connect to the Individual then in most cases he or she is very likely to be delighted that we reached out to them.

B. The Open Group

This is a collection of individuals who are only just beginning to 'form and norm' as a group – they don't really know each other so the group is arranged in a circle that has not yet closed – so there is always a space for another person to join at any time. This is our space; all we have to know is the secret of the introduction.

The best kind of Open Group to join is a mixed gender group made up of three people – especially if we can make up the gender numbers. This is an opportunity to get many different contacts at one go.

C. Lastly the Closed Group.

This group is best avoided because they know each other - they are in deep conversation, are already in rapport and are not 'open for business'. They don't want anybody else joining at this time.

Clever networkers know that by joining an Open Group they can close the group to others until such time as they have 'worked' the group and then they simply open the group again and disengage.

If the person you want to meet happens to be in a 'closed group' then don't despair – 'closed groups' will disperse eventually and that is your opportunity to reach out.

4. Making the Approach

So what is the magic formula that gets us 'invited in' to speak to all these people? It is simple courtesy and permission.

On making the approach to an Individual or an Open Group, we first make eye contact and smile!

It's important to smile because a smile is a clear message to the other person's unconscious mind that we are harmless and therefore not a threat. (We humans cannot bite with our upper teeth alone – i.e. therefore when the upper teeth are exposed we are communicating safety to the other person…who knew!)

Then we ask ...”Hi would you mind if I joined you?” or ‘May I join you?’... wait for the response (which will be positive) and then extend our hand to shake hands (another means by which humans install emotions) and join the person or group.

The key to engaging with anyone at an event is simply to request permission. Ask – and you shall receive.

5. Ask Questions and Actively Listen

Most of us may have heard the phrase that in order to be interesting to people we must first be interested in them.

The very best way to keep people on side is to engage with neutral and open questions. These are questions which do not imply that a negative judgement will be made and are therefore seen as non- threatening.

A great way to start a conversation might be “What’s your connection with the event?” or “What brings you here today?”.

This neutral but universal question engages a person in a non-threatening way allowing us to quickly establish rapport by relaxing that person in our company.

Key subjects to cover in a conversation might also would be have they travelled far, how did they get here, how are they finding the event – then once rapport is established, on to more professional matters.

Keep the conversation focused on them.

Techniques such as the Small Talk Stack and others can help you learn to frame a conversation so that we are always on side with the person yet at the same time gathering vital information for future contact.

This starts with:

1. What’s your connection with the event?
2. Where have you come from? Have you travelled far?
3. Pastimes or interests (‘so what do you do when you’re not networking?’ – usually ask about holidays, a neutral subject that can be very engaging.)

4. General topics such as current affairs or perhaps matter relating to the profession or the industry.

This kind of conversational structure ensures that:

1. We never run out of things to say and
2. The person we are speaking with feels both engaged and valued – which helps build rapport and trust.

When looking to spot business opportunities consider networking questions such as:

1. Who makes the decision regarding our service or product within the firm?
2. (If not them) Are they also at the event?
3. Would you be happy to connect me with them?

These questions will evolve naturally from when the other person quite naturally asks us 'what do you do?' – but remember that the question in the mind of the other person is really 'what can you do for me?'

So our answer must always have relevance and value.

By the way please don't take this as an excuse to launch into a business presentation or sales pitch. This is the time for the 'elevator pitch' – a short intro to what we do and how it could help them – enough to catch their attention and interest.

All of this is leading up to the point where business cards can be exchanged and permission (that word again) sought to make a contact call and 'arrange a coffee' - at a later date.

Such subsequent meetings then have the advantage of a 'warm contact' made at the event followed by permission to call and so normally meet with a greater chance of accomplishing your objective from the contact.

When they give us their business card and we have agreed a time to call – always note the time and date of the call on the card. This provides a 'visual anchor' for the person indicating that we intend to call at the agreed time.

This also starts to create a 'double opt-in' with a contact. The first opt-in is where they have given you permission to call them to invite them to coffee.

The second 'opt-in' is where – making absolutely sure that we call them on the day and the time we promised – they agree to have coffee and set a date and time to meet.

With the double 'opt-in' the other person is now perfectly aware that they are going to have a business conversation about their issues (or about our career). They have invited us to engage, identify their critical challenges and then suggest a viable solution.

This is low-pressure, high-permission, networking.

There is also another simple but powerful strategy – which I call the Advocate strategy - for accessing more decision-makers using networking.

Many of us will have advocates – people who will happily speak on our behalf. People for whom our services or products or past efforts have provided significant value and for whom we have delivered on one of the four key things that we influence people with:

1. We have saved them time.
2. We have saved them money
3. We have solved their problem
4. We have made them FEEL GOOD!

These advocates can serve as powerful sources of referrals for us provided we care for them.

Excellent advocates have two key features that define them: they have the POWER to help you and they have the DESIRE to help you.

I recommend that we list our advocates and create a strategy of advocate-care – breakfast meetings, facilitating networking within the group, small gifts based on their interests and so forth.

Make sure that we connect with them on a business social networking site – LinkedIn tends to be the network of choice when it comes to business social networks.

By using this social media site we also get to see their second level of contacts, which are a rich source of potential referrals for us.

If you have used me and value what I deliver then you should be happy to refer me (as someone that you know can do the job) to your own personal contacts and friends for their benefit.

To help with that introduction, I would typically send a short email script that you could use and then you use the introduction facility on LinkedIn to put us in contact with each other.

I'm just looking for their permission to call them and get a meeting for coffee - once I'm there it allows me to research their needs and look at areas that I can bring value to them.

If I can't, I move on and thank them for their time (and buy the coffee!) and of course, I've asked permission to connect through LinkedIn if I haven't already.

If I'm referred to them through LinkedIn from a trusted contact of theirs - this gives me a visibility and trust factor right from the word go.

Just like being introduced to someone at a 'live' networking event - I get their attention and a higher chance of getting to meet them.

But back to advocates - invite them to coffee or lunch – and while there ask them if they would be willing to introduce you to just three selected names that you have taken from their connections list.

Obviously the more advocates that we can create then the more personal referrals we get to have permission-based access to. Even 20 good advocates could mean 60-120 new warm referrals in any given year.

No cold call, no push marketing- just an opportunity to create an ‘invitation to influence’ at a later stage.

Networking Etiquette

In the last chapter, we covered a practical understanding of networking and its value to an expert, professional advisor, business developer or leader in terms of creating the ‘invitation to influence’ or position your brand within a wider company.

We looked at the psychology of groups, of individuals, the approach and the kind of questions that we might use to open a conversation.

Here I’d like to cover the art of networking in a little more depth and explain how a simple conversation can be conducted to best effect….and how you can safely and ethically ‘park’ someone when you have accomplished your objective.

When entering a networking arena, there are two things that one should keep in mind. Firstly - everyone you meet is connected by at least six degrees of connection.
That is, that someone knows someone, who knows someone, who will eventually lead you to the person that you want to meet. So we should value all connections.

Everybody in that room should matter to us. Why? Because if we have done our research correctly and have entered the right room then everyone there is either a decision-maker or a potential referrer of business.

In networking – everybody matters.

Secondly, every single individual is there for the same reason as you, making connections that matter.

That means, that each person present is predisposed to meeting others and that each one of the people that we connect with are a link on a chain that can help us meet anyone else that we might wish to meet - provided that we follow the chain. Let’s deal with the second point, first.

Every single person there has two things in common with us – 1. We both have some connection with the event and 2. We have both travelled from somewhere else to be there.

These are the two easiest things to talk about when we meet someone for the first time. When meeting someone and having made the approach and having once been accepted, we then have to ensure that we create rapport with that person.

Rapport is a sense of comfort and safety with others, our purpose therefore is to minimise any sense of threat that person may have about us, which is heightened by any sense of difference between us and them. Therefore we talk about neutral, open subjects.

By way of reminder from the last chapter, starting from the top, here are some sample questions to develop conversation with someone.

- What is their connection with the event?
- Have they travelled far to be here?
- What do they do when they are not working (hobbies and holidays) and finally
- Current, topical or professional affairs.

In between this of course, we need to qualify their value to us going forward.

We do this though using an 'elevator pitch' when they ask us what we do. Instead of instantly responding that we're 'an accountant' or 'an engineer' or ' a chief dishwashing technician' - we ask a question.

We will have first researched the question to ask by identifying the UPP (Universal Pain Point) for most of the people in the room.

This is usually part of our initial research before networking and the reason why it is best to narrowly profile (or niche) the room you want to be networking in.

Usually after they have answered the question – 'what's your connection with the event' they then ask us what we do. That's when we have a chance to use my elevator pitch formula; 'Raise the pain, then position the gain'.

By way of example take an accountant at a small business conference. When asked what they do they might usually respond 'I'm an accountant'. To the small business owner their thinking is now 'Well, I have one of those.' – meaning the accountant is now being dismissed for not being of any value to the small business owner.

A High Trust Advisor accountant however would have said 'Do you know the way many small businesses struggle with access to credit to fund their businesses?' (most small business owners at this time would resonate with that challenge and nod in the affirmative).

By asking a question you are identifying whether the listener responds positively or negatively to problem being raised. If they do then they are a potential contact for us. If not, we can identify if they might be a referrer – or if we want to keep our conversation short and move on to identify a more valuable contact.

However if the small business person responds positively to this question, then the accountant might say 'Well my business specialises in getting access to credit for small businesses'.

Now the small business owner can see a potential value in this new contact and the accountant gets to hold their attention and more importantly – their interest.

Once we do get a positive response which qualifies their interest (or lack of) we store that information away and return to the conversation structure, sandwiching this qualification process safely within what is otherwise a very neutral, non-pressurised, conversation.

Once we have carried on with the conversation (and built the very important foundations of having them get to know, like and trust us) and are now ready to close the conversation and move on, we request their business card (if we haven't secured it already), ask them would they like to 'have a coffee sometime..?' to discuss any area that we have identified in which we could be of service to them. (We are not selling here - only getting permission for a meeting).

As mentioned in the previous chapter we ask them when would be best to call and then note these details on their card, plus where and when we met them. We ask for a coffee rather than a formal meeting because it is perceived as less threatening.

Now we have permission for a meeting and a warm contact with whom we have made a positive impression on, who is happy to engage with us at a future time. This is the best kind of contact. Remember it is also essential to call exactly when you say you will. Your professional brand depends on it!

Once we have agreed a coffee meeting (or permission to call to arrange one) with this one contact we then need to move on. Our objective at a networking event is to meet and get agreement from at least three people to have coffee with after the event is over. So we need to know how to move on from them to our next contact.

Moving on professionally requires attention too. It is essential that we treat everybody we meet with respect.

Because we are all connected, we do not know who the person we are speaking with is connected to. How we treat them will determine how we are treated in the future by a possible excellent business contact. So, we NEVER dump – but we can 'Park'.

We should never leave someone on their own when we move on but rather we should ensure that we have connected them with someone else. When someone feels that they have been abandoned by us they project that negative feeling onto us and are therefore not inclined to meet with us again.

Sometimes a contact is determined to 'hang onto' us - perhaps fearful that they will meet no-one else if they let us go.

In either case we can disengage from a networking contact with the following method.

Just say ‘I am going for a coffee...would you like to join me?’

1. They may say “No” – as they themselves are happy to move on at that point to meet someone else.
2. They may say “Yes” in which case, we would then both move to get a coffee.

Along the way, we (as professional influencers) scan the room for an Open group. Once located, we steer toward the group; introducing both ourselves and our new friend with the group – making the introductions where appropriate.

We have now introduced our original contact to new people, people they may never have met without our help.

We have helped them further their connections within an event that, up to our helpful intervention, might have been a complete waste of time for them.

The Law of Reciprocity ensures that they may therefore work harder at a later date to help us (Law of Reciprocity – you do something for me and I feel obliged to return the favour only to a greater degree).

After we have identified and engaged our preferred contacts from this new group and once we have determined the most suitable, we can then make our excuses and leave our original contact happily connecting with their new group of contacts.

It is simple, ethical and effective.

Networking is a requirement for all 21st century experts. It is the means by which we build our networks of influence and promotion both within and without our organisations - and anyone can learn the strategies – and evolve into being a highly trusted influencer.

The High Trust Advisor (Leadership and Sales) Team Coaching Program

How to Win Clients and Lead Teams in the Age of AI

In an increasingly flat-lined, matrix managed and artificial intelligence world it's not enough anymore to rely on being a technically expert professional to succeed as a leader or a sales professional, we must also become compelling influencers and communicators.

It's no longer enough to continue to lead or develop business with reflexive masculine values of competition, command and control we must now also invoke powerful reflective feminine values of collaboration, synergy and empathy.

In the future AI (artificial intelligence) will provide the expertise, the knowledge and the processes to get the job done - but the ability of skilled human influencers to provide empathy, engagement and care to lead, to advise and to inspire will become a much sought after skillset.

Find out how Sean's customised individual and team coaching programs can help your leaders or management and sales team become more powerful influencers of their colleagues and clients.

Help them master the arts of networking, messaging, presenting and speaking, meeting management, coaching and mentoring, time management and building highly trusted relationships with their key stakeholders and team members. Email for coaching program details here; Sean@SeanWeafer.com

The Author

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