

SUCCESSFUL NETWORKING FOR SALES

The Opportunity/the Goal

A networking event, is very often a way of developing leads and building relationships in a more relaxed social setting. This may be supported with entertainment and may involve food and/or drink. As a result, this is often considered somewhat as 'down time' by buyers, but for Irish Industry and Tourism Agency representatives it provides an additional opportunity to generate new contacts and develop greater understanding of the person behind the business role, which supports quality and trusting relationship building. It can also help motivate and stimulate new possibilities for buyers to programme Ireland and your area and hopefully open doors to allow you build business with them.

Be prepared/structure your approach

- A structured hard sell approach will not necessarily be right here. Remember buyers feel this is a social event and an opportunity to wind down, often after a long week at a buyer show/event or a Familiarisation (FAM) trip so best to consider some soft introduction questions.
- Make sure you are in comfortable clothing and shoes (smart casual is the norm, unless the event invite specifies otherwise).
- If you are with colleagues, agree to break up the room and you take one section and the other(s) can work other sections so you optimise your contacts and don't duplicate your efforts.
- Set objectives before you go – if you don't you won't be able to measure success! Why are you attending and what do you want to get out of this?
- Make sure you have your name badge on (assuming it is provided by the event host). It should ideally be positioned at eye level to your left-hand side lapel to be clearly visible and carry your business cards handy, with a pen equally handy to jot a note on the back of any business cards you receive or make a note on your phone as you move from group to group in the room/space.
- Have your business cards to hand. Bulkier or more detailed sales collateral is usually not advised, as it could be considered distasteful, to distribute it in a social setting. Business cards and a strong 30 second elevator pitch should be sufficient.
- Craft your elevator pitch to suit the event audience. An elevator pitch is a short snappy clear description that explains your tourism offering and its USP to them

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and or their clients. It should use plain English in simple short sentences, and be able to be articulated in about 30 seconds (the average length of time it takes to go up or down an elevator)!

- Be cautious about your intake of alcohol. You need to remain focused and alert about the opportunity this presents to grow your business contacts and build future business relationships.

Be clear about your objectives

- Often at trade shows and events there can be a number of different opportunities to network and each will offer different potential for you. Some may not deliver any business potential, so you need to carefully consider your time and which ones are more relevant. So ask yourself, why are you attending this event and who do you expect and want to meet as well as what would success look like from this event for you?
- If attending with colleagues, be prepared to work the room and between you meet as many operator contacts as possible in the networking time period. As much as possible, targeting those new to you and whom you did not get to meet to date.
- Be prepared to seek insights and understanding about these clients, the business and client needs and travel trends.
- Be willing to add value to the conversation - offer NEW information/news or something of interest to the buyer/group.
- Where appropriate - gain permission or identify a reason for follow up contact with buyers.

Manage your time effectively – set goals so you can measure success

If you don't articulate what you expect to get from an event or activity, how will you know if it is successful? Set a goal or a target for the event, so you can assess if the event delivered on that goal for you at the end. Typically, people who don't set goals even for networking events, tend to waste time or can get easily distracted with people they know and are comfortable with rather than using it to reach out to new business prospects or build relationships with those you have recently met, but still need to get to know better.

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Ideally set yourself and your colleague(s) a target number of contacts to make in the agreed time period. In a social setting we would suggest a guideline of a 10 minute contact with a small group of 1-2 persons and about 15 minutes intervention with a larger group (of 3+). Of course this may vary depending on the level of engagement in conversation and interest among the group.

Be mindful of the body language, if the person you are speaking to is distracted, or appears to be seeking out others over your shoulder and making very little eye contact, it is time to take the opportunity to politely excuse yourself and move on. Remember, keep the conversation light, polite and be prepared for lots of small talk.

The Process

If you find entering a crowded room on your own difficult, then you need push yourself and perhaps develop a little silent mantra to repeat to yourself about what you need to achieve.

The first step might be to scan the room and observe the make-up of the groups. Perhaps begin with finding a group where the body language of the group is open (i.e. not huddled shoulder to shoulder). Effective networkers, always have a shoulder turned sideways to allow for others to join the group. Make eye contact with someone in the group and smile as you approach, then ask if it is okay to join them, and follow with a simple handshake or for larger groups introduce your name and make eye contact with as many in the group as possible.

1. Make introductions

Introduce yourself and your business to the group and seek introductions to those in the group. Begin with polite conversation to get to know the ‘person’ before you start probing more about their role in business. Polite questions such as: How far they have travelled, have they been to events like this before or are they attending alone or with any colleagues?

2. Ask and capture insights – about them and their client needs / preferences

Seek knowledge and insights by asking exploratory **questions** about things like:

- a. Where they are from and their history in the industry. This allows you learn a little more about the person).
- b. Enquiring how business is for them and noting any trends in consumer preferences, changes in interest in Europe/Ireland by their clients, changes in booking patterns and preferences (draw on their expertise and insights, these are all valuable to you to better understand their business).

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- c. Typically how long their groups or FIT parties travel for
- d. Specifics of what their clients are interested in i.e. are they seeking city breaks or all Ireland or doing Ireland as part of a UK or European trip
- e. If they target specific groups/niche travel/lifestyle interests

These are valuable questions to help you understand your audience and allow you better tailor information or suggestions and bring to the conversation to the next stage. When you are trying to 'add value' to the conversation and possibly 'share something new 'to their information and awareness of Ireland later in the conversation.

3. Seek feedback – what have they found more enjoyable / useful

Enquire how beneficial (and enjoyable) the Event has been for them. Seek out any highlights for them. Ask focused questions about:

- What they most enjoyed (if they were on a FAM)
- Anything new or surprising they have learned about Dublin (or wherever the event is being hosted)
- If they believe anything they experienced is useful to their programme planning for the future

4. How can you help / add value – developing a relationship beyond this event

- Within the conversation you may have identified areas of interest the members of the group have which you can offer some additional facts/insights/information or a follow up communication on to assist them. Ask yourself, *is there anything else in terms of information/contacts /details you can assist them with... Think: "How can I add value to this conversation now from the Tour Operator/Buyer's perspective?"*
- Maybe it is offering some subtle or some entertaining facts about Ireland that can inform and energise the conversation.
- In the case where the buyers have a previous knowledge about Ireland, it may be an opportunity to mention your business by sharing insights about the destination/area where you are located, focusing on things to see and do in your area they may not know about
- If there is a specific ask of you, from the conversation, this is often the time to seek a business card and gives you permission to take your pen and make

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a note of what the ask/follow on action is, before you file it on your person for timely follow up (ideally before the end of the week)

- Alternatively they may ask your assistance in regard to some practical aspect of their visit e.g. how long should they leave to get back to the airport at X time, where can they find a late night pharmacy, where is the best place to pick up a taxi from or where would you recommend as a good entertainment venue to head on to party after this networking event.

Remember these ‘asks’ are equally valuable to the buyer and allow our strengths shine – as friendly, caring and helpful people with local destination knowledge (the latter, assuming the destination the event is taking place is in Ireland).

5. Planning closing and polite disengagement

Once you have been through the steps 1-4 above, and you have achieved all you can in the conversation and time you have *to add value*, it is time to consider your exit. Usually this can be done by making eye contact (real or fictitious) with someone in another group you may know and excusing yourself as having promised another person you would introduce them to someone else for example. Ideally you should swap cards if appropriate in case you don’t get to catch up again, if you have not had the opportunity to swap cards to date.

6. Make brief note and move on to the next group

On route to your next group/contact, where possible take a moment to scribble a note or a keyword on the business cards/ contact information received as a reminder and prompt for later in the week as to what follow up action is required. Even if it is only a courtesy email to say it was a pleasure to meet and hope the rest of their trip and return journey was enjoyable, signed off using your business signature and business web/contact details.

File your contracts and jotted notes safely on your person and now on to the next group!

7. Follow-up

Before you know it, the event will be over and you can evaluate the new contacts and prioritise those you feel have the greatest potential for you to follow-up with.

Prompt follow up is important, even if it’s a simple email the next day to say how enjoyable it was to meet them and if possible add a small detail item recall from your conversation, which may help their recall of having met you, and then sign off with your name and signature which allows you share your business address, brand logo and website contact details with them.



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For those where there was specific follow up information/opportunity presented, prioritise these for response immediately and in your close out invite follow up or feedback to encourage a response from them.