

Putting networking to work

Business success is often less to do with who you know, than who knows you. No path offers a better route to success in these domains than effective networking. In fact, networking is often regarded as the single most important marketing technique to accelerate and sustain success for any business. Networking is about making connections and building enduring, beneficial relationships. The personal relationships that emerge from networking enable you and your organization to stand out and be both trusted and remembered by others. A host of other benefits of networking also accrue to you and your business. In particular, these include:

- access to power
- access to private information
- access to diverse skill sets

There is no doubt that female networks such as Network Ireland, Women in Technology and Science (WITS) and Women in Science and Engineering (WISER) have had a significant impact on the success of women in business in Ireland. However, there is always more work to be done in powering our networks. Networking is about creating a fabric of personal contacts to provide support, feedback, insight, resources, and information. It involves exchanges and interactions with a diverse array of stakeholders and is a primary route to building social capital.

The problem is that many people build the wrong type of networks, for example relying too heavily on official hierarchies or not being discerning about network contacts. Networkers can also often demonstrate the wrong behaviour. For example, the superficial networker engages in surface-level interaction with as many people as possible, mistakenly believing that a bigger network is a better one.

Rather than making such a mistake, instead focus on developing three core types of networks:

An operational network: This comprises people you need to help you accomplish your job. The key attribute of this type of network is depth and it is built by identifying individuals at work who can support or indeed, block, a project.

A personal network. This incorporates connecting with kindred spirits outside your organization who can help you with personal advancement. The key attribute of this network is breadth and it is built by participating in professional associations, alumni groups, clubs, and personal interest communities.

A strategic network: This involves connecting with people who will enable you to reach key career objectives. The key attribute of people in this network is that they have leverage and it is built by identifying people who have a 'big picture' perspective in your sector who can help you plan and action your overall career.

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Within each of these networks, beware of echo chambers. This refers to our built-in preference for people with whom we share similarities. The problem with this is that if we solely surround ourselves with people who are similar to us, how do we get fresh and innovative ideas and insights? It's harder to break out of our comfort zones and develop relations with people who are different to us. This explains why the word 'work' is within the word 'network'! However, without some diversity within our networks, they can never be as rich and rewarding as they could be.

It may be the case that you feel you have quite a good network, but every so often it requires some evaluation and re-drafting. There are four steps to follow here:

Analyze: Identify the people in your network and what you get out of interacting with them

De-layer: Make some hard decisions to back away from redundant and energy-sapping relationships

Diversify: Build your network with the right kind of people who energize you thus helping you achieve your goals

Capitalize: Make sure your using your contacts as effectively as you can

Finally, some core components of effective networking:

1. Find a good role model: Many times, what appears to be unpalatable or unproductive behaviour takes on a new light when a person you respect does it well and ethically.
2. Work from the outside in: Draw on an extracurricular passion, interest or expertise to enhance your business development activities.
3. Re-allocate your time: Participate in informal meetings – the unessential stuff is the essential stuff
4. Ask and you shall receive: Don't wait until you need something – make a simple request at the outset. Remember also that networking is a two-way street; give and take to see it thrive
5. Stick to it: Don't lose sight of its importance just because you are busy at work - you risk missing out on the strategic perspective and other helpful information
6. Just do it - practice makes perfect; remember people's names; prepare a list of people you are going to talk to at an event and don't leave until you do so. Follow up on any contacts you make to keep the connection alive; support others and always say thank you for connections made.
7. Cultivate a range of brokers: everyone goes for the obvious ones – the objectively powerful people – but work in a wider zone remembering that network diversity is a fundamental success factor
8. Promote and protect your identity: define yourself clearly and be aware of the messages you are sending about yourself in how you appear, speak and engage with others.

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Cool Beans

When Sarah O'Connor and Isolde Johnson decided to put a new business together, their idea was simple – build a food company that made healthy convenience foods, starting out with a line of bean-based products designed to be quick to prepare, easy on the waistline and rammed full of flavour.

In 2014 The Cool Beans company was born and with it, a new kind of product for the Irish market.

“The idea came from the fact that we were both working long hours in our previous jobs and when it came to finding quick and easy food to prepare on the way home from work, there was a gap in the market,” said Sarah O'Connor, self-described queen bean of the Cool Beans company.

“The more we looked into it, the more we thought pulses, beans and lentils should be our ingredients of choice. They're really good for you, high in protein and are underutilised as a food group. So we launched our initial product Cool Beans in 2014.”

O'Connor and Johnson teamed up with a friend, trained chef Sophie Morris of the health app start up Fitometrics, and started road testing recipes. The initial brief was to develop three different products – tomato, smoky paprika and hot chilli flavour – then refine them and get them ready for production.

The next step was to do market research, and what better way than to kit out a food truck and make the rounds of the festival circuit.

“We were still working our day jobs and we needed to find out if this product was something people would actually buy. So in 2013 we bought a little mobile catering unit, the Bean Machine, and went to Forbidden Fruit, Body and Soul, Electric Picnic – anywhere there were lots of people,” said O'Connor.

The feedback was “phenomenal” and the pair decided to take the plunge. Johnson quit her job in February 2014 to start serious business development and O'Connor's salary from her job managing the EY Entrepreneur Of The Year Programme for Ireland with Ernst and Young had to stretch to cover both of them.

They had to make some adjustments to the recipes – reducing the sugar content, making them gluten free and toning down the heat of the chilli – and then learn how to make them in large quantities.

“Networking proved to be incredibly important for us. Isolde had great food connections from her previous job with Michael Carey, the chairman of Bord Bia, and then we went on to the DCU Ryan Academy Female Propeller Programme. At around the same time we started the Food Academy Programme as well,” said O'Connor.

“These things really helped accelerate the business. The propeller programme helped us organise our business planning and get our pitch right and then the Food Academy Programme helped us get the product ready for its first retail listing and get the actual



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product on shelves. It basically took us a year to get the product in the right packaging, get all the labels printed, get the food testing done and get it into the first shops,” she said.

The next step for the company was to raise the capital necessary to keep things moving and by the end of 2014 both O’Connor and Johnson were working fulltime on Cool Beans.

“AIB was a huge part of the launch of the business because we needed capital to get going, to invest in the trademarking, label design and brand design at the beginning. The bank just loved the product and really believed in it and that got us up and going,” said O’Connor.

The company got some funding from its local enterprise office in the form of feasibility support and then an employment grant to fund two jobs. The company’s first employee was taken on to handle sales, marketing and tastings on the road. Supervalu came on board and the Cool Beans product range was finally available to the general public.

A key part of the company’s early success was being able to stay connected to each other while working separately. The pair was constantly on the road, working from their cars,

attending events and visiting retailers, as a result they had to be able to depend on mobile phone coverage from Vodafone.

“Vodafone has been very good to us from the beginning and our relationship continues to be important. We’re a small company that values being able to staying connected – we need to be able to react quickly to our customers, our suppliers and market conditions, what makes this possible is access to

our email on the go and being able to take that vital call no matter where our business is that day” said O’Connor.

Today, from its start in five stores in September 2014, the product range is available in over 400 stores nationwide. The company started exporting to the UK last year and has gone from a turnover of €11,000 in 2014 to €137,000 in 2015 and it forecasts this should reach over a quarter of a million euro in 2016.

“Food is a really tough business to get into. It’s a low margin, high volume business and it can be a ruthless game, you have to really bring something unique and value added to the table. While it is difficult to launch a food brand you also have amazing success stories, the likes of Cully and Sully who have gone before and are a huge inspiration to people starting out,” said O’Connor.

The secret to the success of the company so far, according to O’Connor, is that the two founders have strong but complementary personalities.

“We’re both ambitious and have never let gender stand in our way. If anything, being women has probably been an advantage in terms of press coverage – we have a compelling story and a limited marketing budget so we need people to talk about us and to write about us.”



Sarah O’Connor & Isolde Johnson, The Cool Beans Company.

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