

15 Questions For Your Business Networking Success

by Ron Gibson

Are you attending networking events and not generating any business leads?



If you want better (more profitable) results from your networking conversations, learn to ask better questions.

When you go to a networking event, your conversations will be a lot more fruitful if you ask better questions than the standard, run-of-the-mill “*What do you do?*”, “*How’s business?*”, “*What have you been up to?*” Such questions aren’t necessarily bad and I’m not saying don’t ask them, but it really doesn’t leave you much room to maneuver after you’ve both have answered them.

Same old run-of-the-mill questions get same old run-off-the-mill answers.

Instead, ask questions that both you and your conversation partner will find more engaging, such as

- “What are you spending most of your time on right now?”
- “What’s the biggest thing you’re working on at the moment?”
- “What business problem does your company solve?”

- “What is a good example of how you are doing that?”
- “What’s the most unique aspect of what you do?”

Good questions are tremendously important.

They are far more than just a means of getting information.

They’re a means of engaging and connecting with people in a more meaningful way.

They’re a means of building trust.

They’re a means of making you look very smart and very different from the competition.

And they’re a means of advancing your relationships as sources of direct business or of referrals. You can get all of that done and more by asking the right kind of questions. Powerful stuff!

Listed in no particular order, here are some of my favorite questions that I personally use when I’m meeting people at networking event. Typically, I don’t use these questions as openers but rather I’ll weave them into the conversation having kicked it off with an exchange of pleasantries.

1. What is your connection with this group?

Variation: How do you fit in here?

Variation: Where do you fit in with all of this?

Commentary: A good early question to get the conversation rolling. It might also throw up mutual acquaintances and interests.

2. How do you find this whole networking thing?

Follow up questions:

- Where else do you network? or What other networking events do you attend?
- Do you do much networking?
- What helps you get the most out of your networking?

Commentary: Some more good early questions to ask. We can learn a lot about another person’s approach to networking, where they go to network and how they network when they get there. And it’s a great way to share your networking war stories, tips, strategies and networks you belong to. It’s win-win—both of you will appreciate that.

3. What is your reason for being here today?

Variation: What’s your interest in this group/seminar/conference (or whatever)?

Variation: What made you decide to come to this event?

Variation: Just out of curiosity, why do you attend networking events?

Commentary: Everyone has a reason for going to a networking event. Their answer gives you the real reason they are there and will lead you easily into the next question to ask them. Again, it might also throw up commonalities, not to mention, potential opportunities.

You can usually count on reciprocity and be assured that people will ask you the same question right back.

4. Who at this event would you most like to meet?

Variation: Who would be good people for you to meet here today—perhaps I know someone who would be helpful for you?

Variation: Who is a good person for you to talk to here?

Variation: Are you here to meet anyone in particular?

Variation: Tell me about the kind of professionals you're looking to connect with?

Variation: What kind of professionals make good contacts for you?

Commentary: Maybe you can introduce the person to someone or several some-ones you know in the room. Maybe both of you are there to meet similar types of professionals, in which case, there might be a relationship to be had here with a future referral partner.

5. What would make this event valuable for you?

Variation: What's the main thing you want to get out of this event?

Variation: Is there anything in particular you'd like to accomplish while you're here?

Variation: What do you hope to gain from this weekend/seminar/meeting?

Commentary: When I'm meeting people, I'm thinking what can I offer this person; who can I introduce this person to; what one piece of information or idea can I share with this person; what favor can I do for them; how can I help this person. I recommend you adopt a similar mindset—this is what makes networking work for you. My motto is “give a bit more than you take”. I'm a giver by nature and I find that when I give more than I take, I receive more than I expect.

The **purpose of questions 3, 4 and 5** is to get information that you can use to figure out ways you can be useful to the people you meet.

I never dismiss anyone as unimportant. I think beyond is this person a client for me when I meet people. The person I'm talking to may not need my services but someone or several some-ones in their network may.

6. How do you spend most of your time?

Variation: How do you spend your days?

Commentary: There are a lot of people who don't like being asked "What do you do?" By asking "How do you spend most of your time?" you give the person the choice of telling you about their work or not. Whichever way they answer this question, you have an invitation to ask for more details.

Before I move on to question 7, I want to say a few words about the "**what do you do**" question.

My advice is don't start a conversation with "What do you do?". Frequently, people you meet in a networking environment will start their conversation with this question. The problem here is when you ask this question first up the implication is that you're only interested in what they do for business and what they can do for you—not who they are as a person. Inevitably, you will get to "What do you do?", but don't make it your first question. If you're looking for conversation starters, you can't fail with ones like, "How are you doing today?" "Petty nice place, hey?" "Are you enjoying yourself?" "How far have you travelled today to get here?" Then you might follow up with "Hello. I'm (your name). So, what's your connection with this group?"

Here are some alternative versions of What do you do?

- What line of work are you in?
- What kind of work do you do?
- What does your company do?
- What are you really good at? What is your firm really good at? What do you do better than your rivals?
- What do you tell people when they ask you what you do?
- What are you responsible for? or What are your main responsibilities? (I really like asking this question. It shows where the person's priorities lie, what their job focus is. And, of course, once you know this, you can ask more questions to carry the conversation deeper.)

Follow-up questions:

- So, what got you started in that direction? You mentioned you were in the (blank) industry, "What got you started in that direction? When did you get started in that direction? What led you into that field?"
- Why did you start your business?
- How did you get started in your business? How did you come up with the idea for your business?
- What attracted you to policing, the public service, the legal profession (or whatever)?
- Why did you become a nurse, a cop (or whatever)? Why do you do what you do?
- Is there a story behind why got into the field you're in?

Giving people a chance to tell you their story gives you clues as to who they are and what makes them tick.

- What do you like best about what you do?
- What's the best part of your job?
- What were you doing before?

Commentary: These questions delve deeper, giving the person a chance to tell their “story” which could provide some insightful and valuable information for you. It also a way for you to get to tell your story too because they will most likely ask you the very same questions.

Once you have developed a level of rapport and built up a general understanding of the other person's business progress to more business-related questions.

- What business problem does your company solve and what is a good example of how you are doing that?
- What services/products do you provide to what kind of organizations?
- Who exactly are your clients/customers? How do you go about finding them? How do you generate most of your business?
- What's the most unique aspect of what you do? (This is a better way of asking a person straight out “What do you do?” And it's the perfect question for just about anyone and any situation. It allows you to find out what the person is really good at and how their business compares to their competition. They'll be pleased you asked.)

Commentary: It's only natural to be curious about what the other person does for a living. By asking one or more of these questions, you will learn a lot about a person's personal approach to business and begin to see ways that you can provide and extract value from the relationship.

7. What's the most important thing to you about your company/your work/what you do?

Commentary: A person's answer to this question gives you a strong clue as to how you can develop a relationship with them.

8. What's going well for you this year?

Variation: What's the best thing that happened in your business this year?

To get someone excited about you, get them talking about themselves and their own accomplishments first.

Variation: What's your most popular product/service?

Variation: What's going on in your business these days—anything new and exciting?

Variation: What's most exciting for you right now in your business?

Variation: Tell me about the wins you're having in your business.

Commentary: This helps build rapport. No rapport, no connection! Let them talk about positive things that they're feeling good about. The things that are going well for them. People like sharing good news and their successes so let them tell you about these things.

9. What's the biggest thing you're working on at the moment? (Really like this one.)

Variation: What are you spending most of your time on right now?

Variation: What are your business priorities these days? What's are the priorities in your role?

Commentary: The response tells you what is taking up room in the person's diary and where they might be frustrated or challenged—this information comes in useful for follow up and might even uncover an opportunity for your services. It also gives the person a chance to talk about the “great” things they are doing and, of course, once you know this, you can ask more questions.

Follow-up questions:

- What's the next big thing for you/your business/company?
- As you think about the future of your business, what are you most excited about?
- What are your plans for your business?
- How do you see your business developing?
- What's the number one thing you need in your business right now in order to be more successful?

Commentary: Again, this information comes in useful for follow up and might even uncover an opportunity for your services. And again, it also gives the person a chance to talk about the “great” things they have coming down the pipeline and what they are planning for. Now you can ask more questions and or share your own insights and experiences.

10. What are some of the biggest challenges you have? or What's the biggest challenge for you and your business?

Variation: What's the hardest part of your job?

Variation: What are some of the bigger challenges you have in your position?

Variation: What's on your worry pile (back at the office)?

Variation: What's your number one headache or problem in your business?

Variation: As you think about the future of your business, what worries you the most?

Commentary: Use this question towards the end on your conversation, not early in the conversation. It can reveal so much about a person's business and their current needs. Whether it is staffing needs, training needs, motivation needs, or problems with bad debts, falling revenues, spiraling costs, this question can uncover so many issues that this person faces which you can park in your mind for the future. Whilst it's not about diving in and saying "*oh yeah, I can help you with that*" it is about having that information at a later date that will help determine whether you need to get to know this person further. What's more, you might know someone else who can help.

What if you meet someone who wants to buy?

I'm often asked, *What do I do if I meet someone at a networking event who is really interested in my services, asking questions and giving me clear "buying signals"?* Well, here's my answer. You will have more success in closing that business if you focus on building rapport and then schedule a follow-up appointment that starts the sales process. It's so easy to say to the person, "I've enjoyed talking to you (person's name) and I'd be happy to help you with (whatever your business solution is). May I have your business card and follow up tomorrow to tee up a meeting?" Or "(person's name), would you like to talk further?" Or "When would be a convenient time to call you to fix up a meeting?" Or "Hey (person's name), it sounds like maybe you're interested in my services. Let's find some time to meet up and see how I might be able to help you." Or "Shall we aim to set up a meeting—how's your diary looking next week?" And when the person says, "Yeah that sounds great" you might say, "Are you carrying a business card?" Or, if you already have the person's card, "Can I call you tomorrow and tee up a meeting?" As a general rule, you'll be way further ahead, if you resist the temptation to slip into sales mode then and there.

You don't want to risk blowing your business opportunity by talking too much about your services or product. Simply exchange cards and agree to talk further at a later date.

What a lot of people do—and where they go wrong—is they go straight into a sales pitch when they spot an opportunity based on something that the other person says about a problem/issue they have. A better, more subtle approach is to put that opportunity to the side (it can't go away, you won't lose it) and hold it for a little bit later in the conversation.

This is going to be your segue into initiating a get-together after the event so you can continue the conversation and hopefully, capitalise on the opportunity. "*John, you mentioned that you have a problem with (blank). If you're interested, I might be able to help you with that. It's my specialty. Would you like to tee up a time to chat over a cup of coffee?*" If you have made a good connection, s/he will be more than happy to talk with you again.

Some other variations of what you can say when you find yourself in a situation like this are, "*Let's find a better time to continue this conversation. Can I call you tomorrow so we can discuss this*

further and perhaps fix a time to meet up again?” Or, “Why don’t we continue this conversation in a more private setting over a coffee/over lunch/over a drink after work?”

A few more variations: “Can I call you to arrange a meeting?” or “Would you be interested in grabbing a coffee next week so we can continue this conversation?”, “If I could help you with that would you be interested?” and “Can I call you later in the week to discuss the services I offer?”

Finally, here’s a softer approach, “We’ve obviously got some synergy here. How about I give you a call next week just to learn a bit more about your business and perhaps fix a time for a meeting?”

If you’ve made a good connection, the other person will be happy to talk with you again.

11. Where are you from? or Where did you grow up?

Follow-up questions:

- What was family life like for you back then?
- What brought you here?
- Kids?

Commentary: It’s only natural to want to learn about the person’s background and family. I think it’s a great way to start building some credibility and trust with someone.

12. What do you like to do outside of work? or What do you do in your spare time?

Variation: When you’re not busy at work, how do you spend your free time?

Variation: Is there anything you enjoy more than (blank), doing your job, running your own business or whatever?

Variation: How do you like to de-stress from your work?

Commentary: Deeper connections are often formed through finding common ground that is not work related.

13. Are you on LinkedIn? If yes, follow up with something like, Mind if I send you an invitation to connect?

Commentary: When you meet someone who has an interesting story and they appear to be good at what they do get their okay to follow up with an invitation to join your network of contacts on

LinkedIn. They get to see everything about you and vice-versa, including shared connections and other information that can move your relationship forward, faster.

Typically, here's how my invitation reads:

Hi (person's name). Good to meet you at (name of event). I very much enjoyed our chat—and in that regard, I feel we have a lot in common. For networking purposes, would you like to connect with me here on LinkedIn? I'm keen to seek ways in which we may be able to assist each other to our mutual benefit. Best regards.

14. How can I help you? or What can I do to help you?

Variation: As I'm meeting people here, is there anyone in particular you'd like me to introduce you to? (If there is, I make a mental note of it. If there's not, I let them know I'm only a phone call away and if they think of anything I can do for them, just give me a call.)

Variation: How can I help you get more business? (If you want people to ask you this question, ask them this question first.)

Variation: Who can I help you meet? (Their answer helps you figure out who you can introduce them to later or maybe even at the same event.)

Variation: What kind of people could I introduce you to that would help you grow your business?

Variation: Would it be helpful if (fill in the blank)?

Variation: Given how you've been so generous with your advice/time, how may I return the favor by helping you in some way?

If I like the person, I'll close the conversation by saying something like, "If I can help you in any way, any way at all, just give me a call or connect via LinkedIn" and then I offer my business card.

Commentary: Caveat—you can only ask this question after you've asked your new acquaintance some of the other questions I've given you, the conversation has gone well and you've decided the person is someone you'd like to get to know better.

I have built my expansive network, my reputation and my business on this simple question. But you can't just ask it. You have to mean it. And if someone does request your help, take action on it. **It is the one question that will separate you from the pack** and ultimately lead to referrals and opportunities to do more business.

Figure out how you can be helpful. Being helpful is the best way to start building a strong relationship.

A word on helping: Help in this context isn't about selling your products and services. It's about finding ways that you can assist your networking associates in ways that have nothing to do with sending them your bill.

- Can you send them an article with useful information?
- Can you connect them with someone who will lend them a hand?
- Can you offer them a valuable piece of advice or an idea?
- Can you recommend them on LinkedIn?
- Can you refer them a potential new client?
- Can you give them a business lead?
- Can you promote them and their business in some way?

Those who are successful at networking—meaning they actually can attribute significant new business from the activity of networking—go beyond thinking “What’s in it for me?” to ask “How can I help?”

15. How do you feel about getting together next week for a coffee—it would be great to learn a bit more about your business and see if we can help each other?

Meeting people once at an event and then never talking again has pretty much zero value in terms of growing your business.

Variation: Why don't I give you a call next week to set up a coffee? There could be a few ways we can work together and it would help to understand who you're looking to meet as I might be able to introduce you to a few people?

Variation: Maybe we can help each other over time with referrals and introductions— are you up for a coffee next week?

Think win-win as you work to develop your networking relationships. If you Can't or won't help others who can get on very nicely without you, Why should they go out of their way to help you?

Variation: Can you fit in a coffee or breakfast sometime—it would be great to share a bit more about ourselves and the work we do?

Variation: I'd like hear more about your business and tell you a little about mine. Are you open to getting together for a coffee later on?

Initiating a get-together can be a great first step down the long and profitable road of friendship and mutual benefit with a new word-of-mouth networking partner.

Variation: Should we exchange business cards and and fix a time explore how we might help each other?”

Variation: Let’s meet for breakfast next week and see what we can do for each other?

Commentary: Seize the day! This is a terrific way to finish a conversation with someone you want to have in your professional network. You have made a connection and now you would like to get to know the person better.

You are asking for permission to follow-up. And how easy is it going to be to make that call—you have already agreed to a coffee meeting. It is just a question of setting a date. After all, that’s why you went along to the event in the first place—to make new business contacts.

Asked sincerely, questions like these dig deeper. They will differentiate you from most other people because they are asked so rarely. They are going to help you build more understanding and trust. They will often attract greater interest in you and your business. And you will gather better information that will help you develop the relationship further and create more opportunities to do business.

Remember, the very questions you ask someone are often the same questions they ask of you—meaning the questions I have given you are a perfect way for you to tell your story.

So there you go. **15 questions you can start using to have better, more profitable conversations** when you’re networking at events. I find them extremely useful in moving the conversation along when I’m meeting new people. Try them and see which ones work comfortably for you. Don’t feel you have to follow them in sequence, pick and choose based on the situation you’re in.

I’m not suggesting you use these questions with everybody. Use them with people you feel you have made a connection—and not just with people you think you could get something from because you just never know who people know and where your next referral or piece of work will come from. Some of my best referrals come from the most unlikely of people I meet.

When you ask these questions, remember two things.

First, don’t be afraid to use silence to your advantage. Give the person you’re talking to sufficient opportunity to think things through and respond to your question. Don’t jump in. Let them finish. Even if there’s five seconds, ten seconds of silence. Let them finish.

The second thing I want to say about this is. These questions are only the start. Once you get someone to open up about themselves and their business, ask follow-up questions. *Questions like, Why? How? Why is that important? Go on. Tell me more. What else can you tell me? What’s your thinking behind that? Those are great follow-up questions—seedlings for building great relationships and building your business.*