

Expect the unexpected in 2005



By Robyn Henderson

With the fluctuating tourism markets and repercussions from recent natural disasters, it is very easy for conference and tourism professionals to drown in negativity and the "poor me syndrome". "Poor me," I am the only person I know who is waiting for my two big clients to make a decision on venues for their 1000 pax events, or settle their outstanding invoices from last year's event. I am the only person waiting for my calls to be returned, I have just lost 90 per cent of my market share. As if! Once you make the decision to network with other meetings industry professionals, you will find that your challenges are their challenges also. And calls going unreturned, lack of follow up, shortage of firm decision makers, shifting markets etc. are unfortunately the norm in business today.

SO why not expect the unexpected? If you do, you will find that great networking opportunities always come when you least expect them. The heartbeat of networking is your ability to care about people. If you don't like or care about people, it will be very difficult for you to ever have networking success. Great networkers make things happen.

Let's look at a number of ways you can use the unexpected in 2005.

BE PRO-ACTIVE — Look beyond your immediate industry networks. To survive in this competitive industry, you (or someone from your organisation) MUST definitely attend ALL the industry network events and tradeshow. Visibility rules in this industry — if people don't see or hear from you regularly, they may forget you.

However, be prepared to extend yourself this year — consider creating your own small networking events. Often you will invite one client at a time for lunch or dinner to firm up that connection. However, stretch your thinking and consider inviting a group of your clients to a small networking event — with you as the host. Survey a group of 20 plus clients and prospects and find out their preferred time for an informal networking lunch, breakfast or dinner, where they will have an opportunity to cross-network with prospects for their businesses, not just

your business. Keep the group small enough for everyone to get to know each other, yet large enough for cross networking opportunities to occur. Put considerable thought into the potential matches. And if you think you might not have enough cross networking client potential, consider co-hosting with another non-competitive ally and invite five guests each.

Aim to invite 10 guests maximum; provide name tags (for those guests with poor memories) and guest list contact details (with their permission) for post networking follow up. Your aim is to cross network your clients and help them to make connections, whilst cementing your client relationships. Don't take rejection personally — if you want 10 people to attend your dinner, ask 15 to allow for no-shows or inabilities. You want everyone to be able to sit at one table and have conversations where the entire group can hear one person.

Recommendations to ensure smooth running of your event with maximum return on investment for you as the host and your clients as the guest:

Prepare an agenda for the event and include the name of all guests, who have responded, where they are from and the position they hold. This document could be sent 48 hours before the event. This will serve as a memory jogger and also encourage those who may have been considering

"no showing". You may include on the guest's agenda:

1. Arrival time
2. Start time
3. Welcome and thanks
4. Self introductions
5. Main course served
6. Potential business matching and cross networking opportunities
7. Dessert and coffee served
8. Finish time

Remember to bring your business cards.

Your personal agenda may include:

- Start time (and you must start on time — regardless of how many guests have arrived — and finish on time. If guests choose to stay longer, that's fine, but you must give them an opportunity to leave at a pre-planned time).
- Share your vision for the network series (assuming the first one will be such a success that you will hold them regularly) Be very clear that this is two way networking, you are not the only person meant to benefit from the event.
- Self introductions (here you can use your imagination and on the day, ask for formal introductions and then also have everyone include something personal e.g. what is their favourite sport, film, holiday destination etc.) At this point you may encourage the exchange of business cards, if that has not already happened.

- Fifty-word description of their perfect client (how can you connect them with prospects if you don't know what they are looking for) you will also have prepared your description and to will be precise and easy to remember.

The easier you make it for people to do business with you, the more business you attract.

- Ask For Help time. This is a specific allocation of time where each person has an opportunity to ask for help from the group. This request need not necessarily be a "work" ask for help - it may be something personal or non-work related. This segment is often the most powerful part of the event. Make notes on your guest list of their help requests.

- Stick to your pre-advised conclusion time — no matter what happens. Your event MUST start and finish on time. You might give a 10-minute warning, to allow for last minute networking.

- Finally thank your guests for attending and advise that you will keep them in the loop with future events and look forward to working with them this year.

Within 24 hours of your event, send a hand written thank you note — thanks for making time to come to the networking lunch. Will keep my eye out for possible networking connections for you. You might also include a one-page Feedback-Fax-Back form with three questions:

What did you like?

What didn't you like?

What one thing could we do to improve on this event?

Write your own feedback form- what did you learn from holding this function? What worked? What didn't work? Which of the guests would you definitely invite again this year? Keep accurate yet simple records on the results of this event.

Date:

Event:

Your preparation and post event time allocation (include here business matching, invitations, emails, agenda preparation, your attendance at the event, follow up thank you notes etc.) :



XX Hours @ \$\$

Cost of event (include here an allowance for staff, costs of meal, refreshments) \$

Total Cost:

Ideas for trimming costs for future events:

30 day ROI (return on investment) - \$..... (business resulting from that event)

60 day ROI -

90 day ROI -

120 day ROI -

180 day ROI -

Expect the highest ROI within the first 90 days of the event -

Keep a specific folder set up for these special networking events and when you meet 'A' Class Prospects in your travels, mention the regular events to them.

BUILD YOUR NETWORK BEFORE YOU NEED IT.

Always give without remembering and receive without forgetting. If we give a gift or do a favour for someone in our network and expect something in return — then is it really a gift?

Networking is like growing a flower. You plant a number of seeds, initially you see nothing. Then a few sprout here and there and one day your flower blooms.

Update your resume quarterly. You may not be in the job market today —however it's a good reminder of your transferable skill set, not to mention how far you have come in your career. Alternately, this one act may either give you a great sense of satisfaction or identify the rut you may be in. For those readers working for international organisations, career opportunities and special

projects often come up as a result of market trends and shifts or events e.g. tsunami in 2004 and the rebuilding of the region in 2005.

Consider learning a foreign language. For those of you wanting to travel and work internationally a second or third language puts you way ahead of those without that skill.

Make a commitment in 2005 to earn the right to get a new client by exceeding people's expectations — promise good —deliver great — on time, every time.

The basis of networking is having win/win relationships. Review any 'deals' that failed for you in the last six months. Are these lost deals salvageable? If not, what lessons did you learn from this experience?

Share your wins and credits with those who make it happen. The 'engine room' of most hotels, event organisers, audio equipment suppliers, food suppliers and cleaners rarely gets acknowledgment for their efforts. How can you acknowledge your engine room today? Are you prepared to create a habit of sending a minimum of two testimonials per week to those people involved in making your job easier and ultimately making you look good in front of your client?

2005 is the year for you to expect the unexpected. Energy follows thought. What you think about is what you create. So let's create a master plan and —through networking — make that master plan a reality.

To reserve your copy of the book - NETWORKING FOR EXHIBITION AND MEETING INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS (released mid 2005) — email Robyn Henderson at robbyn@networkingtowin.com.au www.networkingtowin.com.au Ph: 0407906501 or 02 66740211