

The Fast Track to Remarkable Networking

Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.

~ T.S. Eliot

Imagine attending a very popular networking event hosted at a wine bar jam-packed with business people talking, smiling and exuding confidence. It appears that everyone has met each other before and you are the only newbie who doesn't know the secret handshake. You must somehow break the ice and start talking to people about your business. This was me several years ago as I ventured out into the networking world, naive and inexperienced. I couldn't even differentiate who was at the bar to network and who was hanging out having a drink with friends!

I had no idea how to walk up to a total stranger in a business setting and simply introduce myself. So many questions swam through my head. Should I hand them my card and move on or do I linger and chat? If I talk to them, what do I say? What do we talk about? What if there's an awkward silence? What if they start talking about something I don't understand? Should I get a drink first? Do I have pepper in my teeth? I wanted to run!

I finally zeroed in on two ladies who were sitting at the bar. They looked like they were friendly enough. What's the worst thing that could happen, right? I gathered my courage, plastered a big smile on my face and thrust my hand toward them and said, "Hi, I'm Kathryn Wheat." They both looked at me like I was an idiot! I could tell they were barely holding back laughter. Panic immediately set in. My smile faltered. Clearly, I had messed up.

What did I do wrong? I wondered if I should retreat to the ladies room and check for pepper in my teeth one more time?

I stood there with my hand-outstretched waiting for one of them to shake it. Should I put my hand down? After what seemed like an eternity, one of them finally told me with the biggest eye roll I've ever seen, "Uhhhhh, we're not here for that thingy or whatever is going on here." EEEEEK!!! Where is a sinkhole when you need one?

Has something like this ever happened to you? Do you have questions bombarding your mind about these same things when you try to step out of your comfort zone? Is it fear of this kind of scenario that has kept you from networking in the past? Well, there is good news. I'm here to save you from all those awkward and embarrassing moments that will make you feel like the only person in the room who doesn't know the secret to being successful at networking.

This book will provide you with the practical knowledge, and therefore the confidence, you need to step into any networking situation with the tools and insight to make it a productive method for advancing your business connections. I'll even share some of my networking war stories with you. I remember what it was like to be a beginner in the networking world and I didn't have anyone to ask. I had to learn everything the hard way but you don't have to learn networking the way I did. I will share with you the *real* secret to networking that is actually fun and gets results. It's most likely radically different than what you've previously been told or heard. I'll demystify networking and open your mind to the enormous potential of gaining business contacts through simple and effective techniques. By the time you finish this book, you'll understand how to make networking work for

you. You will never fear being that lone clueless person standing with your hand out waiting to get laughed at.

There is a certain etiquette, or protocol, that is expected when it comes to business networking and few beginners have any idea what that entails and therefore they make a lot of errors that can sabotage their efforts. I did a lot of things wrong when I first started and my goal is to help you avoid making the same mistakes. It's okay if you don't know everything when you first get started. Nobody does. We all have to learn. What is important is having a willingness to admit that you need help and then listen to experts who can skillfully guide you on the right course.

Not knowing isn't shameful; it's continuing to not know that will get you into trouble. People will forgive you for being an unschooled newbie for a while but if you never attempt to become educated then you will most assuredly lose respect and potential business opportunities will vanish.

There is one gentleman that I know who I've seen jump from business venture to business venture but he never quite finds the success he desires. He is extremely pushy and doesn't understand that his approach to networking is driving people away from him as fast as they can run. His tactics scream 'desperation' and nobody even wants to greet him after their first encounter. They immediately walk the other direction when he appears because they know a simple hello will lead to being cornered by someone who monopolizes their time with an over the top sales pitch. They know this because time and again it has happened and they stand there wishing their phone would ring or that someone would rescue them from his relentless sales assault. You don't want to be like him. If you put in the time and effort to network, then

make sure you develop the skill needed to make it a constructive method for building your business contacts and not something that works against you.

I embarked on the wonderful journey into entrepreneurship in 2007 when I started a home staging business. At that time, I didn't network at all. I relied solely on word of mouth referrals and that worked somewhat. Growth was extremely slow but at this time in my life I was okay with that, or at least that's what I told myself. I made lots of excuses as to why I couldn't network: I was too busy, it cost too much, I didn't know where to go, and I already knew plenty of people. The truth is, I was shy and didn't think that was the scene was for me. I couldn't picture myself strolling around some gathering or party and randomly introducing myself to strangers and starting conversations with them. Networking wasn't something that I could ever imagine myself doing, let alone being good at.

Then in 2010, I had an idea to create a website that talked about life from a woman's perspective. I called it Woman's InSite. At this same time, I was going through a divorce and many people thought I was foolish or crazy for taking this step because I lacked the business and computer skills most would think necessary to start any kind of business let alone an online one.

I knew I was capable of learning what I needed to when it came to the website, so I made it my priority and learned! I think my willingness to jump in and risk making some mistakes during the process is what gave me the courage to get the business off the ground and then keep moving forward when things got tough.

I spent about six months, and most of my money, getting the website up and running. While the webmaster was building the site, I worked on creating content for the launch. Once it was live, I had no idea how I was going to spread the word. I had this beautiful website but didn't understand how to let people know I was there. I planned to sell sponsorships to make money from the site so I needed to get traffic quickly if I was going to stay afloat. I hadn't thought ahead about needing some kind of budget for advertising when I was developing the site. Since I had no serious marketing money to speak of, people told me I should do some networking.

They made it sound so simple: just go to some events, meet some people and, like magic, they would flock to the business. But I was reluctant because I just knew it wasn't that easy. If it was, all their businesses would be swimming in money, but they weren't. I was also about as green as one could possibly be when it came to how to go about actually networking. I didn't have a lot of self-confidence to begin with and it all seemed very intimidating. I knew what "networking" was but I really had no idea how to approach strangers in a networking environment and then convert that to new business. However, even though I was shy, I realized I didn't have a lot of options, so I decided to give networking a try and see where it got me.

My first step was to throw a launch party for Woman's InSite so I could officially introduce my website to family and friends. About 60 people showed up which was a great turn out for my first try. I displayed the website on a large screen at the event and everybody thought it was wonderful. Food and drinks were served and all had a great time. But the next day it was business as usual for everyone and my inbox remained empty. I had all those people in a room for the party but no system in place to keep my

website on their mind so there was little to no traffic. I certainly couldn't afford to host a party every month to create excitement and the one party I held hadn't produced any results anyway. These were all people that cared about me but they lived busy lives. They weren't all going to visit my website on a regular basis no matter how supportive they wanted to be. Besides, I needed way more than 60 people viewing my site on a regular basis to make it a viable marketing tool for potential sponsors. People are bombarded with information these days and I realized that I was forgotten about as fast as they drove away from that launch party. I knew that I was going to have to do more. I needed a way to reach new people, and a lot more of them, while at the same time keeping them interested! Networking seemed like a possible solution.

Initially, I joined a few small networking groups that met for lunch. I thought if I could just make friends with a few regulars it would make showing up a little easier – which it did. I quickly learned that seeing a few familiar faces settled my nerves and made talking with those I didn't know much less stressful. At times, I forced myself through uncomfortable situations to get out there and make connections. I knew if I wasn't willing to push my own boundaries I could never grow my business or myself.

Once I got the starting time wrong for a meeting and arrived late after everyone had already taken seats at a long table and the meeting had begun. I was mortified when I opened the door to the room and saw all eyes land on me as I walked around the long table trying to find a place to sit. I wished the floor would just open up and swallow me whole. It's a good thing that most luncheon events don't revolve around alcohol or I may have been tempted to order a glass of wine or a tequila shot to try and get past the awkwardness of the situation. That probably wouldn't

have made any better impression on the attendees than my showing up late did.

At these small meetings, I proceeded to network like crazy to get the word out about my website. I talked to people I didn't know at every single event and looked for ways we might work together. I asked them for ideas on how they promoted their business to get ideas that might help me. I also asked everyone I knew about other networking events in the area and went to every single one I heard about. I tried them all! I needed website traffic and saw no other way to get the word out given my limited budget and experience. Being shy wasn't going to cut it. I had to find a way to cope with my insecurities and still get the job done. There were several techniques I used to get past my fear.

I discovered that if I arrived at events early that there weren't so many people to meet upon entering the room. That helped. It was easier for me to have people approach me as they came into the room rather than have all eyes on me expecting me to make the first move. I also made an effort to make friends with the hosts of events who usually made a point to introduce me to people so I didn't have to approach them cold. This helped me feel a little more like I belonged and was part of the group.

Standing up in front of a room full of people at networking events and talking about my business was great preparation for what I do today but at first it was very hard. We'll talk more about becoming a speaker later, but even at those first meetings I quickly realized the benefits that could be gained from being the one speaking at an event rather than just attending. The confidence boost networking gave me created the courage to tackle public speaking, which I had never done before. As I conquered my fear a little at a time, I spoke at numerous

networking groups. I began each speech by telling my story of going from a housewife and volunteer, to entrepreneur. After those experiences proved successful, I developed a networking class and continued to improve on my speaking skills. Those that knew me, or heard my story, were inspired and motivated to step out in spite of their own fear.

I will be the first to say that speaking has opened many doors for me. While it was completely outside my personal comfort zone, it did get easier over time. I would have never imagined even a few years ago that an incredibly shy person like me would become a teacher or professional speaker. Now, I actually get paid to speak and train people on how to network properly by leading workshops. It's amazing what you can do when failure isn't an option.

I don't intend to make it sound easy, it wasn't, but it wasn't as impossible as I assumed it to be either. Let me tell you about my first speaking opportunity. I did **not** go willingly! I was pretty much forced into it kicking and screaming. I had been attending this particular networking lunch group for about 18 months. They met once a month. Each month, we had to drop our card in a bowl that was used to randomly draw for the following month's speaker. Each time the host would draw a card, I would silently pray; *Please don't pick me! Don't pick me!*

Of course, eventually, my card did get pulled out of that bowl and I was scheduled to be the next month's speaker. I was horrified and, of course, panicked! A friend calmly reminded me that I had a whole month to prepare and I only had to speak for ten minutes. I couldn't even imagine how I was going to stand in front of a room full of people and talk to the entire room for ten whole minutes. That seemed like eternity to me. I was wisely advised to

share my story of how I went from being a woman with very limited business experience and computer skills to an entrepreneur who owned and managed a successful web-based business.

I determined that my first step was to write down what I wanted to say. I've always had a talent for putting words together so this part wasn't difficult. After that, I made some notes on notecards and practiced my speech several times in front of the mirror. By this time, I'd made some great friends in the networking world and invited them to come support me in my first attempt at public speaking. I knew that I'd come a long way since my first networking event but I was still extremely nervous about standing in front of a room and speaking for ten minutes.

When it came time for my speech, I felt like I wanted to run. As I looked out in the audience, I saw so many familiar faces of people that I knew had come just to hear me, there was no way I was going to let them down. Many friends had driven long distances to support me and hear me speak. I knew they'd be kind no matter how it turned out and it really didn't matter if it wasn't perfect.

The speech itself was all kind of a blur to me. I didn't remember exactly what I'd said when I finished but I was tremendously relieved I'd gotten through it without making an absolute fool of myself. Then, as people approached me afterward, I was shocked at how many friends and even complete strangers congratulated me and told me how I had inspired and motivated them. I had no idea that what I said would have that kind of effect on people. It was a real eye-opener for me.

I had asked a friend to record the event so I could critique myself afterward. Later, when I watched the video, I was surprised at

how poised I seemed because on the inside, I was a bundle of nerves. After I had time to reflect, I felt pretty good about the experience and was amazed at the number of people that asked me to come and speak at their networking groups. That first attempt opened so many doors and revealed how powerful speaking could be for me. Now, I'm so glad I managed to set aside my fears for just a few minutes and give it a try.

After several years of networking, meeting all kinds of people, and figuring out how to turn connections into business opportunities by trial and error, I developed specific networking principles that worked based on real world experience. I quickly recognized there was a market for this information and enthusiastically taught others what I'd learned. Just like me, these people were looking for answers on how networking really works and how to make it work for them. Over the years, I have seen many people approach networking with immaturity or, even worse, old school tactics and end up making all kinds of mistakes that can easily be avoided. Seasoned networkers observe each other, as well as those new to networking, and make judgments. If those first impressions are negative they can be very difficult to overcome, but not impossible. I know that feeling of being a bumbling newbie as I was just that not long ago. After some success in teaching my networking class to different groups, in 2014 I established the Kathryn C. Wheat School of Real Estate to teach networking skills to Realtors.

This was a huge step. Don't forget how anxious I confessed to being at the beginning! When I spoke the first time I was so nervous that after visiting the restroom several times, my friend ordered a glass of wine for me in the hopes it would settle me down enough to stay out of the bathroom. I drank half of it before I got up to speak. Thankfully, I no longer need that kind of liquid

courage, or anything else, to calm my nerves which is a good thing or I might have developed a reputation for being a lush!

What I learned I did not come by easily and I desperately wished someone had handed me a book that contains exactly what I'm going to share with you and teach you. The networking concepts I teach include:

- How to prepare yourself to network.
- How to brand yourself to lend credibility to your online presence.
- How to make a good first impression.
- How to overcome fear and confidently meet new people.
- How to greet business people appropriately.
- How to engage properly in conversation with other networkers.
- How to create a great introduction.
- How and where to network.
- How to understand and prioritize the different kinds of organized networking groups.
- How to stand out in a good way.
- How to understand the buzzwords you may hear.
- How to employ effective conversations tips.
- How to prevent one person from dominating your time at an event.
- How body language can enhance your networking efforts.
- How to stay in touch with your new connections.
- How to deal with that huge stack of business cards that you acquire from attending networking events.
- How to decipher and prioritize which contacts to spend your time meeting with, who to add to your email list, and who not to waste your time on.

If you implement the tools and techniques within this book, you will not only be able to increase your network and grow your business, you will also have more confidence when it comes to making new connections and meeting the movers and shakers in your field.

The basis of *Networking: Naked & Unafraid* isn't about joining a nudist colony! It is about how to discover your true and authentic self and then present that to the people you want to do business with. People respond to those who are genuine and that is the first and most important lesson you will learn in this book. Networking isn't about convincing people you are someone you aren't just so they will buy whatever you are selling. It is about letting them get to know the real you. And don't worry; you can actually keep your clothes on!