Networking skills for freelancers

Creative Toolkit

If you work as a freelancer then you need to network; being well-connected is essential if you're going to get the work you need to be successful. In this Help Note we give you some essential tips for networking, both face to face and online. Read this, act on the advice and you too can become an effective networker.

www.creativetoolkit.org.uk

HELP NOTES: Networking skills for freelancers

What is networking?

Networking is probably the most important marketing tool for anyone who freelances. And yet it's often loaded with baggage. Many see it as being false or aggressive. The very idea of "selling yourself" can make people break out in a cold sweat.

Good networking is not about these. In fact networking is about:
→ making connections with people who share your professional interests.
→ building professional relationships over time.
→ being honest about yourself and your skills.

It's good to think of networking as a generous activity. It's as much about what you give to other people as about what you get out of it.

Why network?

There are a number of reasons why you might do this: developing your career; building up your skills; keeping in the loop in a fast moving industry; meeting interesting people.

Networking is not primarily about getting a job, although that might be one of the ultimate aims. It's much more about finding common ground and maintaining a professional relationship with people who appreciate your skills. That will result in better opportunities and more satisfying work over time.

Get other people to do your networking

A lot of work is found through recommendations and word of mouth. When meeting someone always keep in mind that you want to lodge yourself in the other person's memory. They'll never recommend you if they've forgotten you exist or are not sure what you do. The clearer and more distinctive the message, the easier this is for them.

When thinking about what impression you might leave, ask yourself "what do I want people to say about me when I'm not in the room?".

How are your soft skills?

Technical skills are important, but don't underestimate the power of soft skills. These are things like:
→ being able to communicate clearly
→ listening to others and picking up on what they say.
→ working supportively as a team member.
→ be appropriately assertive when you need to be.
→ engendering a feeling of reliability and trust in those around you.

People will often pick up on these before they get to know your technical skills. And first impressions are important.

What makes you different?

There are probably many thousands of people who share your job title, but there is only one person who works the way you do. You are unique, and if you can help people appreciate that uniqueness your networking will be much more effective.

For this to happen you have to know what is different about you, compared with anyone else who might do that job. This can be tricky, but here are some useful techniques:
→ Think of other people in your job role and write down every way that you are different from them.
→ Find out how people feel when they work with you.
→ List the ways that you bring benefit to others when you work with them.
→ Try to sum up the way that you work in one word, an adjective that you would be happy to be associated with if someone described you like that.

If you're not sure of the answers to some of these questions, it's a good idea to ask people who you trust and who have worked with you. It takes some courage to ask someone else how you come across professionally or what you're good at. But if you pick your moment and the right person it can be very illuminating.

For example...

Try getting some feedback from people who give you regular work. They're coming back to you for a reason, and you need to know what that reason is.

Who do you know, and who knows you?

It's good to take stock from time to time of people you already know. Most job opportunities are not formally advertised, so it's important that your network contains people who can keep you in the know and who know the kinds of things you're interested in.

Look through your phone contacts, email address lists, any business cards you've collected, people you meet in the canteen, etc.. List people in one big document and put them into one of three categories:

1. people who might have the authority and budget to give you work at some point.
2. people who can't directly give you work, but who are closely connected to those who can.
3. people who are knowledgeable and experienced in your professional area.

Have a plan to expand this list according to where you're trying to head. Put time aside to go and talk to people. See it as a research project, not as a desperate attempt to get a job. You may well hear of job opportunities when you talk to others, but your first aim is to find common ground with others and build on that over time. Keep a note (in the same big document) of conversations you have with people and the outcome of those conversations. Note down when you should next get in touch, and put the date in your diary.

Approaching someone you don't know

Demanding work from someone is akin to aggressive selling. This gets you nowhere and makes everyone feel uncomfortable.

Being professional means demonstrating that you understand the needs of the person who might want to work with you. So do some research into anyone you are going to contact for the first time.

Meeting people

When meeting someone for the first time, don't think of it as a one-off opportunity to be brilliant. Think of it

as part of a longer strategy for them to get to know you, and vice versa. That will take some of the pressure off you if you're nervous. It's also important to have a plan for the meeting. For example:

Before
→ What is the purpose of the meeting?
→ What will they get out of it?
→ What will you get out of it?
→ Do your research: their role, responsibilities, budget, experience, etc....
→ Talk to people who have worked with them or know them better than you.
→ Look at their LinkedIn or other online profiles.
→ Think about possible good follow ups after the meeting (e.g. sending more information by email, linking up on social media, etc....)
→ How long will it last?
→ Where is the best place to meet? (Somewhere quiet? A coffee shop? The pub?)
→ If you've offered to buy them a drink, don't forget to take some cash!

During
→ Arrive early.
→ Keep focused on the reason for the meeting.
→ Keep an open mind. (They may mention something useful you hadn't anticipated.)
→ Listen, and don't be afraid to make a few notes.
→ Ask them how they prefer to keep in touch – email? LinkedIn? Phone? – and how often. (This will stop you feeling like a pest.)
→ At the end be clear what you'll do and what they'll do as a result of any action points you've discussed.

After
→ Follow up! Put any action points in your diary and don't be late with them. This will keep you in their mind, and show how reliable you are.
→ At the very least drop them a note of thanks. People will probably remember if you're polite. They'll definitely remember if you're not.

Events and parties
Networking often takes place during informal chats at parties or events. If you're at an event where you don't know anyone it can be quite nerve-wracking. Reduce your nerves by reminding yourself that:
→ everyone is there to meet people (otherwise they'd have stayed at home).
→ you're not there to get work, but to build new relationships over time.
→ you don't have to meet everyone.

A plan is useful here too. Think about how long you're intending to stay, and give yourself the aim of meeting a certain number of new people before you have to leave.

Dos and don'ts at parties
If you want to come across as warm and engaging:
→ smile.
→ make eye contact when saying hello and while they're talking.
→ make handshakes firm (but not violent).
→ ask questions.
→ listen.
→ offer help and advice.
→ talk about your own work in terms of the benefits it brings to the production, the team or the boss, rather than purely what you do.

For example...
A runner might talk about how she helps things run more smoothly on a certain kind of production. It's much more engaging than just saying "I'm a runner", and it will help her stand out from other runners.

Conversely there are things which you should avoid:
→ Don't just talk about yourself.
→ Don't look over their shoulder at the people on the other side of the room.
→ Don't complain about the difficulty of finding work. (You'll sound desperate.)
→ Don't complain about how difficult it is to fit in all the work. (You'll sound arrogant.)

Moving on from the conversation
People often have problems breaking away from a conversation because they don't want to appear rude.

In fact there is nothing wrong with moving on, especially at a networking event or party. Everyone is there to meet people, and you don't want to monopolise somebody.

HELP NOTES: Networking skills for freelancers

One technique is to ask the time (or look at your watch) and point out that you have to go by a certain time, but still need to talk to a couple of other people in the room. You can even say:

"Please excuse me. I'm just going to mingle in that corner before I have to leave."

Even better is to introduce the person to someone else. And then leave them to talk together.

Business card etiquette

Not everyone has a business card but they can be very useful.

If you intend to keep in touch with someone you can finish the conversation by asking for their card. This punctuates the conversation nicely and enables you to move on.

Don't thrust your own card at someone unless you have been asked for it. Asking for their card first will nearly always provoke a request for yours and it's much more polite.

A word about kissing

It can be very uncomfortable when someone you hardly know goes for a "media luvvie" kiss. One way around this is to go for a very obvious handshake before they get the chance. It's still polite, but avoids unnecessary invasion of your personal space.
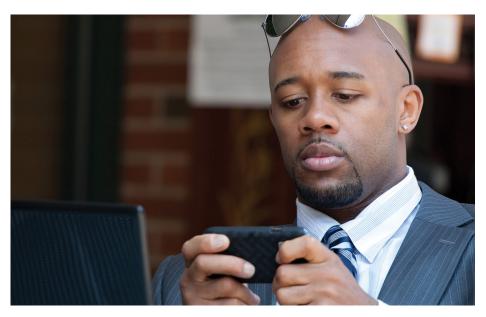
Helping people find you online

These days it's important to help people get to know about you online. If you work in the media or creative industries it's odd to have no digital presence at all. But it needs to look professional.

From time to time you should check what people will find when they search for you online. Does it give a professional impression?

Any online presence should also be recognisably the same person someone would meet face to face. For example the name you use to introduce yourself to people should be the same in your online profiles.

A recognisable photo helps, preferably showing you in a professional context. If you use social media a lot in your personal life, try to separate it from your online presence in your professional life. Privacy settings on Facebook can help, as can having more than one Twitter account.

Think about which are the most useful social networks for your type of work. For example IMDb, Talent Manager or Hiive for production work, or Spotlight for actors. If you're not sure, ask others who work in the same field as you.

What to put in an online profile

As with CVs it's important to focus any online profile. Think about the kind of person who would read the profile and only put the information relevant to them.

Try to make any profile engaging, personal and relevant. Don't just put your job title, but try to add some information that distinguishes you from everyone else. For example, instead of writing 'Producer' as a job title you could put 'A TV producer who specialises in hard-hitting factual programmes'.

Remember that online profiles are usually read on a screen, so don't have large blocks of text. Sentences and paragraphs should be short. Break up the paragraphs with white space. Make sure you keep your profiles fresh. Setting up a good profile takes time, but a tweak every so often is not time-consuming, and will show people you're still alive and active.

Have a networking strategy

Effective networking should be something you weave into your normal professional life. Don't just think about it when you're out of work. Try to plan in advance who you'll meet, which parties or events you might go to, and which direction you'd like to take your career next.

With social media, put ten minutes aside at a specific time every week to update your profile, engage with others and learn about developments in your line of work.

Don't hide away

Networking is ultimately about meeting people and helping them get to know you. You don't have to be best friends with everyone, but they need to get a good idea of what you like doing and your professional skills. So don't be bashful. Get out there and enjoy yourself!

More resources

BECTU runs vocational courses throughout the year on a variety of topics. Find out more at www.bectu.org.uk/vocational-courses