



Startup companies are stressful, yet exciting places to work, and whether you're the star entrepreneur, a partner or a sales professional trying to generate an initial stream of revenue, professional networking can play a key role in achieving your first-phase goals. **The bigger your network**, the more access you'll have to funding, customers, partners, and perhaps most importantly -- advice.

Almost everybody in the business world uses social media to some extent, and it makes for a great opportunity to connect with new people. However, there are a few principles to keep in mind while networking on social platforms.

Know your platforms.

The rules of etiquette and the types of people you'll find **will vary from platform to platform**, so it's important to keep your messaging and approach appropriate while you find new connections. For example, reaching out to strangers on Twitter is more socially acceptable than it is on Facebook, since most people try to restrict their Facebook visibility to close friends and family.

On LinkedIn, almost every member is a professional seeking professional connections. For most startups, LinkedIn is the best place to meet new contacts and exchange information.

A STARTUP'S GUIDE TO PROFESSIONAL NETWORKING

By Jayson DeMers

Conversations are gateway opportunities.

Look for active conversations on social media, and start some of your own. These are perfect opportunities to uncover new connections. For example, if there's a running public conversation on Twitter about touchpad technology and your startup is releasing a new iteration of software relevant to the conversation, jump in! Introduce yourself briefly, but more importantly, make a real contribution to the conversation and follow it as it develops.

After the conversation ends, reach out to anybody you engaged with directly and ask for more information about who they are and what they do. You may also find conversation participants reaching out to you because of your expertise. LinkedIn Groups are an ideal place to look for these conversations.

Keep in touch regularly -- but not often.

Once you've found a connection and introduced yourself online, follow up with that person so you stay on top of their mind. This is especially important for a connection who is considering investment, or a connection who has a future -- but not present -- need for you. Your follow-up messages can be **short and to the point**, though flattery and personal consideration sometimes help, but don't follow up too often or you'll end up annoying your new connection.

Reach beyond the screen.

Don't let your connections stay confined to the digital world. Once you've interacted a handful of times, take the next step with a phone call or, even better, an in-person meeting. Nothing can replace the personal feel of direct interaction.

Whether you're meeting your social-media contacts or engaging in regular networking events, it's also important to establish your in-person networking techniques.

Have your elevator pitch familiar- but not memorized.

Your **elevator pitch** is the first chance you'll have to make an impression on someone unfamiliar with

your startup, so practice it often to make sure you have it down. However, I advise you not to memorize it word for word. If you do, your pitch will sound over-rehearsed and regurgitated in a real-world application. Instead, go over the highlights, focusing on a few key phrases so you can come off sounding natural.

Be open to any opportunity.

Even if someone doesn't seem like a good fit for your needs at the moment, they could still present a great opportunity later on. **Be open to meeting almost anybody**, and try to make a great impression every time. Collect contact information whenever you can get it, and listen to people when they talk about their business. You never know when an interesting partnership opportunity could arise.

Be yourself.

Don't try to ham up your personality or put on a fake sales persona. People will notice. Instead, be yourself. Show your true personality, and show your enthusiasm for your startup. Personality definitely counts in the networking world, and yours needs to be sincere.

Go out and introduce yourself.

If you want to meet people, you have to go where people meet. Sign up for networking events around your city, and try to sniff out group activities where professionals or potential investors might be lurking. Go out of your way for opportunities, and never be shy about introducing yourself.

Networking is both an art and a science, so no matter how much you try to learn about it on paper, the best way to improve yourself is to **get out there and do it**. Take note of which strategies work, which ones don't, and any changes you can make to expand your network and improve your reputation in the field.

About the Author

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