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How to Get Clients

as an Independent Consultant: The Networking Game

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How to Get Clients as an Independent Consultant: The Networking Game

How do you get clients as a consultant?
It comes down to networking.

I have to be clear — networking is not about attending industry events and 'foisting' yourself on people. That might still 'qualify' as networking. But, it's not going to get you very far. It's certainly not what I will be recommending here.

Good networking often starts with an introduction and a private meeting. No matter what, the basics of networking is about turning an interaction into a repeatable, professional relationship. It is about building relationships, not glib salesmanship or awkward forced conversations.

Networking is a skill. Like any skill, it is something that you can learn — something that you can be taught. If you are new to networking, all the better. That means your perspective won't be clouded by misconceptions.

If you want to build a consulting business, networking needs to become second nature — part of your daily routine and weekly schedule. Practice will build confidence and instincts that will allow you to shine under pressure. Don't underestimate the power of tailored advice and in-person training.

What we will deliver here is a crash course on what 'good networking' looks like — the basics of how to build a consulting business, get clients, grow your opportunities and succeed.

Start With a Killer First Impression: A Consultant Always Does Their Homework

No matter if you are just starting out as a consultant or a seasoned professional who is looking to expand their client base, there is one cornerstone of networking that everyone needs to master — the first impression.

Don't get me wrong, there is far more to building the long term client relationships that are key to a successful consulting business and maintaining job security and financial stability while self-employed. But every network relationship starts with a first impression, and that impression leaves an imprint on the rest of that relationship.

It is always possible to overcome a bad start, but that takes time, thought, and ultimately, resources. If you get things off on the right foot, every subsequent interaction becomes easier. Online communications have a greater impact and it is easier to set up future engagements — the path to closing a deal is shorter and that person will be more likely to go out of their way to connect you with people within their own network.

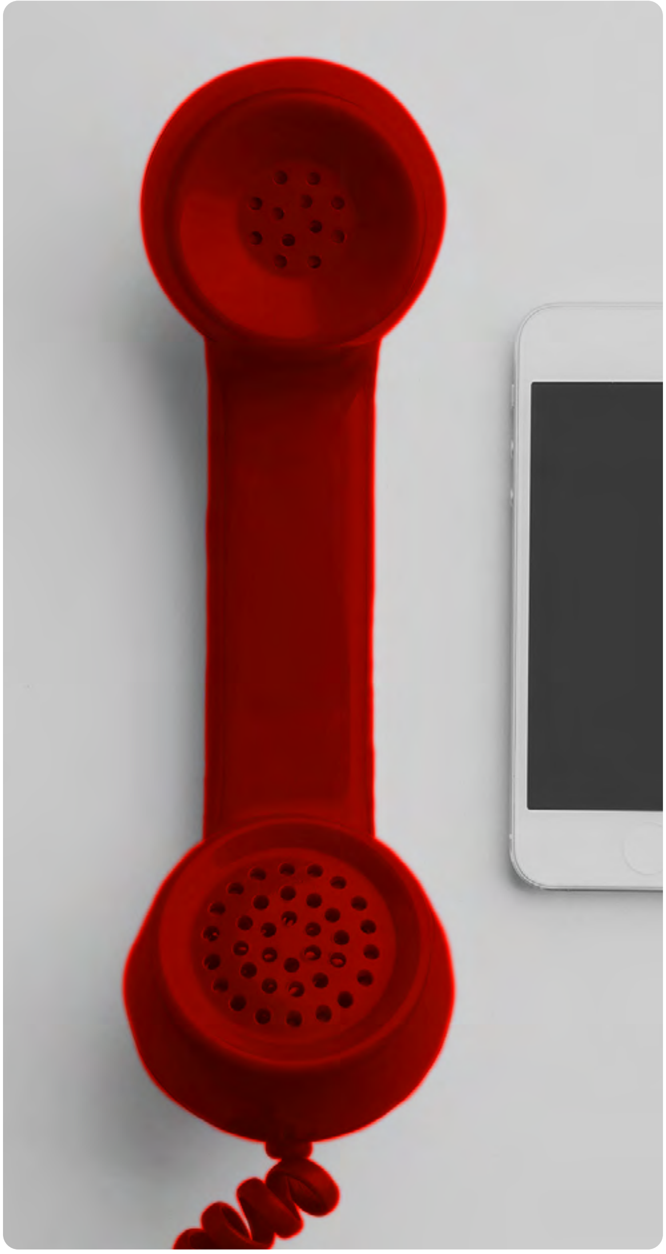
We have written extensively on how to make a good first impression and would suggest checking that out for more details. But it can be simply stated that there are five broad tricks to making sure someone leaves an initial encounter feeling impressed:

- one, let them shine;
- two, never create a pressurised sales environment;
- three, deliver real insights that they will value;
- four, be prepared and do your homework;
- five, have a reason to be speaking with them in the first place

Get an introduction

The best way to get off on the right foot is with an introduction. Again, this comes back to not simply cold rushing people at industry events. It is far better to meet people in private, connected through your extended network.

If someone wants to speak with you and is assured of your professionalism by a mutual acquaintance whom they respect, you will be winning from the word "go". This kind of best-case scenario isn't always possible. But, leverage your existing networking to make your first impressions as powerful as possible.



Speak directly to their interests

Broadly, everyone's favourite person is themselves, and no one likes to feel pressured into a decision. Under most circumstances, the best way to leave a good impression is to make someone feel comfortable, get them talking about things they like and be able to chip in with insights that deliver increased clarity on that subject.

When networking as a consultant, you just need to make sure that the main topic of interest under discussion is that person's job, career or business, and provide tidbits of advice that demonstrate the value of bringing you on as a consultant.

Know what you are talking about

The way you do this is to avoid sales pitches and to always do your homework. You need to know who you are speaking with, what they do, who they know, what they like and what their pain points are likely to be. Even if you are meeting someone you have known for a long time, do a quick Google search and make sure that you are up to speed with their career.

Then, start thinking about how that information will help you speak with that person in a way that will be well received. Make sure you never let things slide into a sales pitch or expect too much out of a first engagement.

This is a point that deserves a little more detail.

Learn How to Deliver Just The Right Amount of Advice: Never a Sales Pitch

If you are meeting someone for the first time or for the hundredth, the number one rule is to never jump into an unsolicited sales pitch.

During the final stages of signing a deal, you might get asked to deliver a sales pitch. This is the only time you should do this.

At all other points, you need to demonstrate your skills, not sell them. Not only is this more convincing, it is a far less pressured and obvious way to engage with network connections.

The worst thing for a first impression or an ongoing relationship is to give off the impression that you 'expect', 'need' or 'want' something out of the person you are speaking with. This will make the person feel uncomfortable, pressured and used. It will make you seem needy, desperate and weak.

You want to enter every engagement with some valuable insights you can deliver that will demonstrate your value as a consultant without it having to be outright stated.

However, you need to make sure not to give away the family silver. It can be tempting to go overboard. The art is in providing just enough information to get them interested, but still leaving them wanting more. If you tell them too much, they won't need you. If you tell them too little, you miss the opportunity to impress them with your wealth of knowledge and concise insights.

For example:
You are meeting someone you indirectly know who is a director at a medium-sized law firm. You are aware that they are considering a transformation project to digitise and centralise their case management process. This means their company will be facing indecision about building an IT system and how to train staff to effectively work with new processes and tools.

You need to familiarise yourself with the opportunities available within the legal sector — how the technology enables lawyers, how A.I. can be deployed to enhance discovery and how certain legal services can be automated. You need to learn about the risks — cybersecurity, data protection and failure to take advantage of investments.

Get them talking about digital opportunities — a topic you can prompt simply by stating that it is something you have always found interesting. Then, add insights as the conversation progresses. Talk about the compounding value of digitising case material and delivering access to the cloud. Talk about how when approached right, the tracking capabilities inherent in digital documentation can actually improve data security and visibility.

Show them that you know what you are talking about, but don't give away the blueprint to take action on these insights. That should be saved for after they sign a cheque.

A 4 Step Process to Networking Success

Ok — so you 'get' the need to impress through demonstration and the importance of a good first impression. But where do you start? Who do you contact? How do you get an introduction?
What are the practicalities of growing your network?

Ultimately, you need to start with the people that you already know. That means digging out the stack of business cards in your top draw, finding all of those people on LinkedIn, chucking the business cards in the bin and starting the process of reaching out.

If you have already built a professional corporate career, you have no doubt met scores if not thousands of people — people you work with now, people you met at professional events, suppliers, partners and colleagues that you worked with previously.

The more diligent you have been building this kind of professional network, the easier it will be for you to transition into consulting. But, if that does not describe you, do not despair — all is not lost.

You don't actually need to know that many people. You just need to know the right people. One well-connected contact who is willing to help you out might be all you need to get the introduction required to grow your consulting business.

No matter what your current network looks like — that is where you need to start. What comes next is four-fold:

1. Categorise your contacts

You need to start by putting the people within your existing network into categories. You need to group people by how well you know them and whether or not you believe they are best suited to hire you themselves, influence someone who might hire you, or introduce you to someone who might hire you. As you begin to meet people, you need to further group those who might directly hire you based on how soon you anticipate closing that deal.

a. **People you can approach directly:**
How well you know someone will indicate the professionalism and caution with which you need to make your approach. Particularly if you don't expect this person to hire you directly, familiarity might allow you to be completely upfront with this individual — simply asking them what they think about you as a consultant, and how comfortable they would be connecting you with people in their extended network. Honesty is valued under the right circumstances.

b. **People you can approach directly:**
For people you want to hire you directly, you need to be a little more circumspect, even if you have known them for a long time. It is important to demonstrate your value and lead them to the conclusion that you would be a valuable asset on their own.

The same goes for someone you would like to introduce you to others, if you don't know them very well. Ideally, you want them to suggest making the introduction — something that might seem hard, but is actually rather likely. Remember that a lot of people are invested in looking good to their colleagues. They will be motivated to ingratiate themselves with you (a knowledgeable consultant), and look good by association by introducing you and your expertise to someone they know.

c. **Long term and short term wins:**
You need to remain in contact with everyone. As you meet people, you will be able to assess where they fit in a 'hot'/'cold' spectrum of ready to make a 'deal'. When someone is close, you need to remain in more active contact. But, don't simply write off those who are much harder eggs to crack. You need to create a long-term pipeline of client opportunities.

Make sure that you maintain regular contact with your slow burning connections. Some of this can be done online (as we'll explain), but make sure to keep in touch. You alsoneed to maintain contact with your early clients and those people that helped you set up your network. Make time for people on a short and long term basis — both are critical to your success.

2. Meet for face-to-face chats

The bread and butter of networking as a consultant is getting out there and meeting people, face-to-face. Digital communication and phone calls are also valuable assets. But nothing beats the connectivity of sitting across the table from someone.

This should become part of your routine. Aim to meet between 4 and 6 people every week for unstructured 'catch-ups'. That can be lunch, dinner, drinks or just a coffee. Use trigger points in their world as a reason you want to meet up.

A good trick is to have Google alerts set up for company and personal triggers. Stay abreast on industry news and use broader events as a reason you were thinking of them. You can even turn things around, saying you want to meet up to ask their advice on an area of expertise, only to turn it around in the end and deliver them advice that they can use.

3. Use LinkedIn to broaden your reach

You can only meet so many people in person. You are limited on time and global reach. You can use business trips to meet with people in your extended network. But, you need to lay that groundwork online. The same goes for your regular actions with people who live within your city.

a. Be social on social media

LinkedIn is your number one online resource. A website can add value, but LinkedIn is not only a storefront, it delivers a communication platform used by almost half a billion professionals worldwide. LinkedIn is social media, use it to be social — it is the watercooler of the 21st century, particularly for people without a single, physical office. Make posts, respond to posts made by others — be engaged.

The importance of LinkedIn makes this a valuable topic to investigate in greater detail. We have written a basic guide to LinkedIn networking and advanced tips on tools that can make LinkedIn simpler, both of which are worth checking out. But, the cliff notes version is broadly the same as what you need to keep in mind when networking in person: avoid sales pitches, and; demonstrate your value

b. Deliver value to readers

Do not, under any circumstances, write posts about how great you are. No one wants to read that. Instead, think about your audience and write every post to deliver real value to the reader. You want to become a thought leader on topics of expertise — encouraging your online network to think of you as an expert they can turn to for answers. The beauty of online posting is that the effort you put into one article will continue to add value to your brand for years to come and to many different people.

A good tip is to use the research you undertake for face-to-face meeting to write long-form posts and blog articles (LinkedIn provides its own blogging platform). You can also write “lessons learned” style pieces based on the jobs you have already undertaken. There are a lot of options. Just always deliver value and avoid boasting.

c. Use LinkedIn to complement face-to-face meetings

LinkedIn is a valuable asset on its own. But, it is best used to complement face-to-face meetings. You want to use LinkedIn to follow up with people you have already met (either with direct messages or with blog posts that you think they might find valuable), and strive to turn digital relationships into face-to-face meetings. If you notice someone you have never met in person is engaging with your posts, respond by linking and commenting on their posts, and then eventually follow up with a direct message asking if they want to meet for coffee.

4. Learn from each networking engagement

The entire networking process is a learning experience. You will learn how best to engage with different people as you meet them. Make notes about that, keep a log of how engagements go and learn how to best communicate on a per-person basis.

Networking is also a great opportunity to learn about yourself. Particularly when starting out, how people react to the news that you are starting an independent consulting business will give you insight on how they perceive your skills.

You may learn that people see value in your work that you had not previously identified. Listen to this feedback and use it to grow. Take it into consideration when you think about the types of jobs you could deliver. Those insights are particularly relevant to the type of job that person is likely to hire you to complete.

A 4 Step Process to Turn Contacts into Contracts

The reason for all this networking is to turn contacts into contracts. To do that, you need to do more than meet with people. You will have to be persistent. You will need to talk about money, learn how to write a project proposal and deliver. Ultimately, this is all an extension of the networking foundations discussed to this point. But, without a plan, your efforts will flounder. Focus will pull you through the long-haul.

1. Get Good at Following Up

You need to make sure that you don't let any engagement sit for too long. Don't simply meet with someone and leave it at that. At the very least, you want to send someone a message telling them it was nice to have a chat and it would be good to do so again.

Keep adding value

If you had an in-depth conversation, a great thing to do is send a more structured email or direct message that summarises some of the points you made, and maybe point them to some additional resources that they might find useful.

You need to perfect the art of concise value, writing summaries of engagements that are both short, to the point and thorough. You want what you write to deliver value without boring someone. You also don't want it to seem like you are trying too hard.

Paradoxically, long emails seem overzealous, even though they are often easier and faster to write than a shorter email that delivers just as much value. Make sure to spend the necessary time to edit something down, honing it into a piece in which each word and sentence matters. Synthesise value, build structure and deliver outcomes.

Write targeted and indirect blogs

Your 'follow up game' can extend beyond direct contact. As touched on in the section about LinkedIn, 'thought leadership' is a powerful tool to frame yourself in a positive light within your network. If you are focused on closing a deal with a particular contact, make sure that you are writing about things that are relevant to them.

Depending on your relationship and what you wrote, you might even be able to send it to them directly. But, if you have regular interaction on social media, it is likely that your posts will show up in their feed. This kind of visibility is always valuable. If you are visibly demonstrating your expertise on the exact pain point that person is experiencing, you are on your way to a paid engagement.

2. Talk About Money at the Right Times, in the Right Way!

At some point, you will have to talk about money. You need to wait for the right time. But, when the time is right, you need to be straightforward, prepared and frame all of your price points in terms of the value you will deliver to the client.

The right time to talk about money is when things get serious. Wait for them to ask you something like "well… what do we do next?"

It is often best to talk about money both in person, and in writing. You may be expected to quote figures in person, but always make it clear that you will follow up with a project proposal for them to review. That project proposal should be the primary place you quote figures.

How to write a killer project proposal
Detail is critical to a project proposal. You need to be specific about what you will do, what those actions will deliver, how all of that relates to cost and the timelines that accompany outcomes. You do not want to over commit but you do want to be detailed.

What separates a good project proposal from a great one is placing the cost of your services in the context of the value those services will deliver.

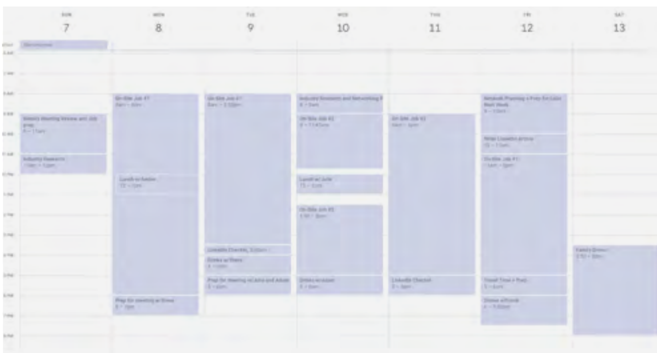
If you are asking for £35,000 to undertake a month long project, that might come as quite a shock. But, the weight of that number will begin to melt away if framed by the estimated £1 million in savings your plan will deliver to the business this quarter, and £10+ million over the next 5 years. If anything, that makes it look like you should charge more — maybe you should!

3. Make a Plan and Stick to It!

Networking needs to find a permanent home in your day-to-day schedule. That means building a plan and sticking to it. No thinking, “this week has been hard, I’ll just go home and eat a pizza”. No! You need to get out there and meet that startup founder you scheduled for post work drinks.

The practicalities of different weeks will differ. But we would recommend aiming to meet between 4 and 6 people for sit-down chats every week, add 4 to 6 new contacts on LinkedIn every week and write one long-form LinkedIn blog post every two weeks to a month. On top of that, you need to set aside time every day or every other day to go through LinkedIn, like posts, make short comments and respond to any interactions that have come your way.

Turn that schedule into a calendar. Set reminders on your phone, even print out a weekly schedule and tape it to your refrigerator. You need to develop a list of weekly repeated tasks. Then, spend an hour on the weekend slotting those tasks around the jobs, projects and meetings you have on any given week. That will look something like this:



You might find different figures work better for you. However, the more active you can remain, the faster your network will grow and the more job opportunities you will get. What is vitally important is that you make a commitment to yourself and stick to it. If you don’t, you will find yourself doing nothing at all. That is a path to ruin!

4. Get Some Help: Hire an EA

When it comes to scheduling, your networking ambitions might become overwhelming. After all, you didn’t start an independent consulting business to become an administrator. And, it is true — the more time you spend organising your schedule, the less time you can spend delivering outcomes to clients and actually getting out there and meeting people.

A good executive assistant (EA) is a godsend to any independent consultant. They will allow you to avoid calendar clashes, optimise your time and spend more time actually consulting. A good EA will also get to know you and your business, giving you advice on decisions you make and how you prioritise your time.

Online services like Smart PA or Magic can provide you a budget solution when just getting started. But as your business grows, and your scheduling demands become more complex, investing in a personal assistant that works full-time for you can be an investment that pays off massively.

Networking Doesn't Stop When You Land The Job

As your business grows, happy clients become one of the best networking resources at your disposal. You need to look at every job you get as a way to get 5 more — grow your network and expand your client base.

Networking is about demonstrating value. Nothing demonstrates value better than delivering a valuable outcome to a client. With every job you get, you need to make sure three things happen:

You are set up as a first port of call for future projects in that business You are introduced across different departments within a business You expand your network connections within that business and within that sector

Effectively, you want to make sure that you are maximising the reach of any impact you make by delivering a valuable outcome to a client. The more deliriously happy you can make a client, the more effective you will be at leveraging that job to get more jobs.

Do this by making yourself valuable to as wide a range of business functions as possible. Make sure that if your project crosses over into another department that you go there and introduce yourself. Think of reasons that you might need to speak with another head of department to pick their brains on how some element of your project will integrate with the wider company. Be prepared and have things to say. Treat these kinds of interaction like you would any networking opportunity.

Afterwards, remain in contact. Keep updated on how changes you oversaw are doing. Offer to give extra consultation on problems that may arise. Keep engaged, keep present and keep the contacts.

Do You Want More Help? Investigate Consulting Franchises and Partnerships

Getting tailored advice can make the process of perfecting your networking game that much simpler. The best way to do this is to join a consulting partnership franchise.

A consulting partnership will deliver access to face-to-face training opportunities, some of which will be focused on exactly what we have been discussing here: how to network. You can get direct feedback on your skills, what you need to improve and how to approach particular people within your network.

Consulting franchise groups also offer access to EAs, administrative support, email and project proposal templates, and other services that will help you focus on what you do best — consulting. This can even include direct support finding networking opportunities. You will meet other independent consultants, some of whom will be willing to work in partnership with you, or provide you access to contacts that they believe your skill set is better suited to help.

Different types of consulting partnerships

When looking into these organisations, however, you need to be cautious about what you are signing up to join. Not all consulting partnerships are the same. We have written in-depth about the differences between consulting partnerships, franchise groups and associate programmes, something you need to understand.

The quick version is that although these groups all use common names, some focus on delivering training, admin support, networking opportunities and networking support (what we have described so far), while others focus solely on delivering access to clients.

Direct access to clients is an appealing option to some new consultants — effectively allowing you to bypass the need to network. However, this puts you in a position of not directly owning your client relationships and, more or less, acting as an 'employee' of the associate programme.

If you want to maintain your independence and build a business in which you are your own boss, you need to focus on building client relationships that you own and a personal brand image that will bring opportunities to you, not the organisation you work in association with. Partnerships will help you find networking and client opportunities. The difference is that those are relationships that you "own" and grow through personal connections.

Play the Long Game and Build a Brand: An Action Plan to Get Clients

In all of your networking efforts, you need to make sure that you are persistent. If you look at what we have covered here, your success will come out of engaging from a large number of angles, over time.

Remove the pressure you place on yourself

If you are frantic to close a deal, it will show and will damage your goal. Avoid making anyone feel uncomfortably pressured. To do that, you need to remove the pressure you place on yourself. But, that does not mean being 'hands-off' with your network. Persistence is key to remaining front of mind over the long haul. Have confidence in your network and your skills, be prepared to wait and engage with a large enough pool of potential clients that you don't have to force anyone's hand.

Take a multi-pronged approach across all categories of contacts

You need to use face-to-face chats, direct digital communication and indirect thought leadership to remain relevant to a wide audience. You need contacts who can help you meet other people who are primed to hire you immediately, and those on the backburner who are likely to become clients 6-months, a year or even two years down the line. All of these people are valuable — and all are important assets within your network.

Don't forget your friends: remember the human touch

As your business grows, you need to maintain relationships with the people who helped you from the beginning. That means meeting up for chats and the occasional phone call, even if the person hasn't directly hired you in years. These people form the core of your network and will continue to help you meet new people, even evangelising for your business on their own accord.

For your entire network, remember the human touch. People like to work with people they like. The best business relationships closely resemble friendships. Sending Christmas cards, birthday cards, keeping on top of people's personal lives and remembering to ask 'non-business' questions when you meet up — all of these things are valuable ways to cement relationships for the long term.

Build a brand for excellence

Your long-term goal should be to build a personal brand. This is the key to scaling your networking efforts and bringing client opportunities directly to you. You want people to associate you with excellent consulting outcomes before you ever sit down to meet.

You will achieve this through a combination of online thought leadership, happy clients and meaningful client relationships. You want people you have worked for and know eager to recommend you to those they know unprompted. This will bring a steady flow of work to your door, delivering you the job security to pick and choose the jobs you want, and grow your business as you see fit.

Get started today!

The number one thing you need to do is get out there and get started. If you are already an independent consultant, or just contemplating a career change, today is the day! Start by making a list of your contacts and then reach out to those you know best. If you are just getting started, you can do all of this before you quit your job. If you are already a consultant, what are you waiting for? Job opportunities await — get out there and start networking!

Are you interested in taking your next steps into being an independent consultant?

Speak to Us

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Thank you.