

So You Think You Know How To Network?

— Think Again —

Phil Bedford, Master Franchisee at Asentiv and founder of The Rebel Networker, is showing people how to really use everyday opportunities to grow their business.



The awkward introduction, taking it in turns to ask the same mandatory questions, finally the faux-enthusiastic business card exchange—you'll probably never speak again—networking is horrible right? Well no, because that's not networking, it's not even communicating. According to Phil it's "cold-calling face-to-face", and it's a costly missed opportunity.

Real networking is about making the most of the word-of-mouth relationships that you have with everyone around you to mutual benefit. You have a legal problem? Ask a lawyer. You have a medical problem? Ask a doctor. You have to find clients? Learn how to network properly.

Phil had a master's degree in engineering and a successful career in sales before he by chance found himself at a BNI networking event 10 years ago, standing in for a member that couldn't make it. It was a fateful move, putting him on the path to a hugely rewarding career. "I'd not been to an event before that was so structured, where everyone got to talk and there was education" he says. "I just thought wow, I'm in."

It was through the contacts he made there that he first discovered Asentiv (previously the Referral Institute) a Relationship Marketing Training company specializing in teaching entrepreneurs a proven system in how to attract clients through building relationships rather than hiking up marketing budgets. It was the opportunity Phil had been waiting for. Maximizing his coaching and public speaking skills, he brought the franchise to the Gulf eight years ago. Within its first year his office was number one in the world for revenue. A couple of years later he was awarded a place on the executive circle as one of the top five performers worldwide, and he's been there ever since. "I've grown my business around 35% every year" says Phil. "I just follow the systems we've got." His scope now includes the U.A.E., Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and he's looking to expand.

Going to the right events, speaking to the right people and learning to leverage the opportunities that you face every day—sometimes without even realizing—can prove hugely cost

effective. Whereas PR agencies may have the expertise to do it for you, they can charge hefty monthly sums for the service. Phil says his marketing budget is only around AED7000 per year—like most business he relies heavily on word of mouth, and he can teach you how to do the same.

"Anyone that's in business knows that the best way to get to where you want to go is through relationships" he explains. "A couple of clients have come to us before they start businesses. Makes sense—when's the best time to build a roof? Before it rains! Some people get it—other people have never experienced rain."

There are many types of rain that can prove fatal for a new business—lack of preparedness, lack of financial backing, lack of clients. Many entrepreneurs start out high on enthusiasm but low on funds. "People often start their own business to have a better quality of life" Phil says. "They want more free time, they want revenue, and in the first 3-5 years you don't get that. The temptation to give up is huge. To build a network of people around you that understand, know that feeling and have come through it, that's pretty powerful. Support, clients and time are the main things we do."

Asentiv offers different programs for all budgets, from as low as AED697 up to an advanced course for AED45000. Phil also offers something quite unique—his own website, The Rebel Networker, on which he shares tips, resources and video interviews with various guru and experts, completely free.

He is now on the lookout for new representatives across the region—people with the same passion and talent to build their own franchise and spread the word. Be warned, his standards are high: "Napoleon Hill said you're the average of the people you hang around with" he says. "I've always reached for people that scare me, have more. If you can surround yourself with people like that you start to assimilate their expertise and their attitudes, and you take that back to your company."

And say goodbye forever to awkward networking? At last.