Start with the basics—you know you provide a valuable service. However, without an ongoing and ever-increasing number of new, quality prospects, you’ll eventually run out of people with whom to share the benefits. You might even end up asking yourself that most dreaded of questions in the world of small businesses, which is, “Who do I talk to next, now that my original list of names has run out?” That thought can be downright discouraging, but it need not happen.

The key to continued success is the development of profitable, win/win relationships with practically every new person you meet—whether one on one, at a networking event or in a social setting.

But how do you do this? It’s simple, really. Ask questions. Specifically, you need to ask “feel-good” questions. These are questions designed to put your conversation partner at ease and begin the rapport-building process.

These are not intrusive, invasive stereotypical “salesperson” questions. Feel-good questions are simply questions designed to make your new prospect/potential referral-source feel good about the conversation and you. This is vital, because, generally speaking, folks prefer to do business with (and refer business to) people they know, like and trust. Asking feel-good questions is the first step to accomplishing that goal.

Some basic “feel good” questions:

1. **“How did you get started in your line of work?”** Most people love the opportunity to “tell their story” to someone. This kind of question, in a world where most people don’t care enough to want to know their story, makes you appear interested and differentiates you from the crowd.
2. “What do you enjoy most about what you do?” Again, you are giving them something very positive to associate with you and your conversation. You are making them feel special, important.

At this point, it’s time to ask a more directed question about their pets—establish if they have any, and if so, what kind they have. Obviously, this is a key element to any potential future business relationship for you. If they do have pets, they’re even more qualified as a prospect. Don’t push your pet-sitting business at this point. Just show interest in their pet.

In fact, the conversation can end without you having mentioned your services. This is good, since your relationship with this new prospect may not be far enough along for them to be receptive to this idea. Of course, if they say, “Now, I just don’t know who will be able to watch Fluffy while I’m out of town next week,” obviously that would be a good time to offer yourself.

Consider this: the typical person knows about 250 people. Thus, every time you meet one new person, and develop a relationship based on the fact they now feel as though they know you, like you and trust you, you’ve actually just increased your personal prospect list by a potential 250 people, every single time. Do this often enough and before long, you’ll cultivate a network of endless referrals. The next important thing to do is make sure you’re memorable enough to be referable.

Once you’ve made contact, and established yourself as a person with a particular service to offer, it’s all well and good to pass out business cards, but if people don’t remember you, they probably won’t be calling you to follow up, and they certainly won’t keep you in mind for their future needs or possible referrals.

Make yourself memorable when meeting other people face-to-face. Consider these ideas:

1. **Be distinctive.** A brightly-colored, hand-painted tie, an unusual necklace or other jewelry, a good (but not overpowering) cologne or even just impeccable grooming can all help you stand out in a good way. Anything helping people separate you from the crowd helps them remember the rest of you. You don’t have to be outlandish—although some folks work that angle quite well—just don’t blend in completely with the crowd.

2. **Be fully present.** Be fully engaged and fully aware of people. You can break this down into smaller, somewhat mechanical pieces—listen well, respond promptly, maintain eye contact, etc.—but if you are truly present in the moment, those things will happen naturally. Many people only seem to be “half there,” so being fully engaged helps you stand out.

3. **Ask thought-provoking questions.** The very best questions can’t be communicated here because they’re specific to the person you’re interacting with
and will arise in response to your initial conversation. Do step two, and this will flow naturally.

4. **Reinforce your keywords.** People aren’t going to remember long descriptions of what you do, or likely even a 15-second intro many experts teach you to make. People will, at best, remember a few key things about you:

   - Your name
   - Your company name
   - Your business/industry (in three words or less)
   - Your location

What you want to do is find ways to unobtrusively increase the occurrence of these things in your conversation. For example, is there some kind of story behind your name? Have it ready to use if there’s an opportunity. Does your business have an unusual name? What’s the story behind it—what does it mean?

*Anything* you say to reinforce one of the items above helps make you more memorable. And if they can remember just three of them—“Joe, the pet-sitter from Soho” or “Maria, the woman who named her company after her dog”—you’re doing great.

5. **Contribute to the group conversation.** Don’t hog it, and don’t say just anything in order to say something publicly, but saying one really smart thing at your table or in front of the whole group will make you much more memorable than half an hour of semi-conscious small talk. Create value for others and you create value for yourself.

Consider this a form of brand strategy and marketing. One of the most important concepts is a brand is not just a memorable name or logo—it’s an experience. A great brand communicates values and emotions, which are called to mind whenever someone thinks of the name or logo.

Here we’re talking about your personal brand. Remember: *you are your business.* The impression *you* make on people is the impression they will have of your business, so make it good and make it memorable.

**Sidebar:**

**Where to network**

Aside from “everywhere!” think about the pockets of people you may have access to:

- alumni groups
- neighborhood directories
- church membership lists
- clientele lists from groomers
- obedience schools
- PTA memberships
- trade associations
- chambers of commerce
- civic and service groups
- trade shows
- dog shows
- SPCA
events; small community events; walk-a-thons; free vaccination days; dog park clean-ups; adoption fairs or animal shelter town fairs; local pet shops; local events in the calendar section of your newspaper; join online social groups (chess, knitting, nature walks, book clubs, etc.) and use them as a social AND networking group.

What to do before an event…
• If you don’t have any, get business cards printed up. No one will take you seriously as a business when your information is on a cocktail napkin.
• If you have any brochures, feel free to bring them and leave them on a table or close-by to hand out.
• Dress appropriately and cleanly. Treat yourself to a new ensemble just for going to the event! Remember, if you feel confident, you will exude confidence!
• Get positive and think of only good scenarios that could happen to you.
• Try to think what you have in common with the people at the event. You all traveled to get there; you are guests of the same hosts; you are all there to learn something; you are all in business.
• Plan to talk to 3 new people and gain 3 new pieces of information. It may seem daunting at first, but after the first 3, you’ll be into the swing of things and if you talk to anyone else, it’ll be icing on the cake!
• It’s not about you. It’s about what you can do for them. Focus first on helping others and building good will. Don’t evaluate everyone’s worth by what you think they can do for you (it’s not about getting new clients, it’s about telling your clients about their services – and hopefully the same in return)
• Describe your service in 15 seconds or less. Instead of “pet sitter” practice an opening that is catchy, something that hints at your personality. Something like, “Some people are allergic to my job! I work with pets!” Maybe “I’m multilingual: I speak to people, birds, cats and dogs!”

At the event…
Allow the other person to talk and they should do the same for you. It is more preferable to be more interested than interesting. You learn as much from talking as you do from listening.

For brief encounters, try a quick comment or easy question:
• Quite a turnout tonight, isn’t there?
• People seem excited about the speaker!
• What have you heard about the presentation?
• Looks like it’s going to be a good evening!
• I don’t know anyone here tonight – mind if I chat with you for a few minutes?
• This is my first time here – can you clue me in to how it all works?
• What brings you here tonight?
• How did you hear about this event?
• Tell me about your business?
• What inspired you to go into that?
• What’s been the biggest surprise so far?
• What’s your biggest challenge?

After the event…
Most importantly, make contact with those you met. It’s vital that you make contact as soon as possible with everyone whose card you have (incidentally, that’s why it’s more important to get other people’s cards than to give out yours). Divide the business cards you collected into two groups: those you specifically want to contact for a purpose, and those you simply met.

For the second group, I recommend a quick note, possibly on a postcard, saying how pleased you were to meet them at the conference and you hope you will meet each other again at a future event.

For the first group, if you said you would call on Tuesday morning make sure you call on Tuesday morning. Seems obvious, doesn’t it? But most people don’t do it, so you will stand out simply because you kept your word. At this point, you can move from networking mode into sales or job search mode, or whatever is appropriate.

Have something relevant to offer. Successful networking is more about giving than it is about asking, so if you’re asking for the meeting, you should do some thinking in advance about what you might be able to bring to the table. Mentioning in your note or phone call that you may be running a special (all new clients get 1 free pet sit) or a recommendation for something that could help that person professionally (I spoke to Person X at the event who was looking for your services.)

As a pet sitter, you can always mail a padded envelope with a dog treat if anyone you met has dog. It will definitely show that you’re willing to go the extra mile for service!

Make time and location convenient. A good rule is that if you request the meeting, let the other person pick a date, time and place that works best for them, whether it be their office or the Starbucks next door.

Keep it short. Be respectful of people’s time and don’t plan to take more than an hour. In fact, proposing a shorter amount of time, say 30 minutes, will make it easier for them to accept because they’ll sense you’ll keep the meeting focused and not ramble off on tangents. Then, if all is going well for both of you at the meeting,
you can always go longer, but at least you’ll have gotten through the tough part of getting the person to meet with you in the first place.