We all know that networking is about the giver’s gain. Or, at least, if you did not know that, you do now. Networking is not about “using” others. It’s about creating value for others. If you do that, you will see a return from your networking efforts. So, whereas many tutorials tell you how to get more referrals, I want to tell you how you can give more referrals. How can you be a valuable referral partner for someone else?
Rule #1: Network on Another’s Behalf.

What would happen if you went to your next after-hours networking event with a specific referral partner in mind? You circled the room, met dozens of people, hunting desperately to find good connections for that person? When asked, “What do you do?” You respond, “I’m trying to help a friend. He does X and needs to meet Y.” What would happen if you called that partner the next day with a handful of qualified appointments you’d found for them?

Try this at least once in every five outings or events you attend. Pick a relatively new connection for you, someone you have recently met, but know that they have great potential to give you great referrals. By delivering several high-value referrals to them, you will elevate the trust-level in your relationship very quickly and start seeing reciprocity very soon.

Rule #2: Build a Detailed Database.

First of all, no matter what you say, you’re not going to remember everything. The human memory is far too limited for you to remember what you talked about with someone years ago. But why is that a problem? If you were only networking to dig for leads for yourself, you might not care about the seemingly useless hour you spent getting coffee with someone that didn’t pan out for you years ago. But, you need to be able to give good referrals to others. So, if you met someone today for whom that schmuck you met years ago would be a good referral, how could you know?

Build a database of contacts that contains keywords describing each person’s business or industry, and what you discussed with them—even when you know that you won’t be able to do business with them. And, most importantly, make sure this database is searchable. What I am describing is a Customer Relationship Management system, or a “CRM.”

"Even if you’re not convinced that you need a CRM to be a good salesperson, you certainly need a CRM to be a good referral partner."
That’s right, you need a CRM. You may have resisted the use of a CRM in the past because they seem cumbersome or just unnecessary to your business. After all, you’ve got a good memory, right? We’re all pretty decent at remembering things that are important to us. But, if you want to remember the things that are important to others, not you, then you need to index it in a database. Even if you’re not convinced that you need a CRM to be a good salesperson, you certainly need a CRM to be a good referral partner.

Don’t believe me? Here’s how this proves true for me:

I belong to a small group of business owners who meet once a month to share referrals. Every month, each person describes the profile of the referral they need to meet. Now, most people in this setting stare blankly as if they were playing a game of Go-Fish and can’t seem to remember which cards they had in their hand. Therein lies the problem: you don’t memorize your hand in Go-Fish, you look through your cards each time a player asks. And that’s what I do in networking. I have my laptop open as they speak, and when they’re done I say: "I have 13 matches. I know I could get you a meeting with 2 of them."

Now, admittedly, it took quite a bit of time to over the years to keep this database up-to-date. I have entered notes on contacts that I knew could never be useful to me personally. But, that effort allows me to stand apart from others an invaluable referral partner.

**Rule #3: Follow-up with Everyone.**

Let’s go back to the previous example. Assume that the people whom my referral partner needed introduced to were of little value to my business. The 13 matches that resulted from my CRM search were all contacts that were ill-qualified prospects for my own business. Why on earth could I say: "I could get you a meeting with 2 of them?" It’s simple: it’s because I’ve been in touch.

That’s right. I’ve been in touch with people who offer seemingly zero value to me. Not frequently, and not at a high cost, but I make sure to touch base and ask simple questions. “It’s been a while since we had coffee and I was wondering [insert question relating to previous conversation].” (Of course, how do I remember our previous conversation? See rule #2.) This keeps your name top-of-mind for the contact so that you have enough of a relationship with the contact to suggest that they meet with your referral partner.
How often do you follow up? It’s easy to know how often to follow up with people whom you have a reason to follow up with. If they’re in your sales pipeline, or you find a real synergy, then the relationship can grow naturally. But what about these contacts that you would otherwise forget if it weren’t for their potential value to your referral partners? I would suggest that you follow up with everyone at least 30 days after your first meeting just to say thanks, and ask a follow-up question of some sort. “You said you were working on X... how’d that turn out?” Beyond that, a 180-day cycle is about right. Any more often and you could get annoying. Any less and you could be forgotten. People tend to remember even the most chance encounters for at least 6 months.

Rule #4: Provide Referrals, Not Leads.

I can buy leads and it would be a whole lot easier than spending months getting to know you and your business. What I’m interested in is a referral—a warm introduction that means I will almost certainly get the meeting, if not the business.

So what’s the difference between a lead and a referral? Let me give you a real example. A while ago, I was trying to get an audience with the owner of a local food store. On a Wednesday morning, I met with some referral sources of mine and one said “I know him. Here’s his phone number. You can tell him I sent you.” I graciously took it, but I wasn’t too excited to make the call. Do you know why? Because that’s barely more than a cold call, and I hate cold calling.

So, I procrastinated. A few days went by and the following Monday I was getting coffee with someone else. I mentioned that I’d like to meet this same store owner. As fate would have it, this person also knew the owner of that store. He also had his phone number in his database. He also was willing to help me get the meeting. But his approach was far different. He emailed the store owner, carbon copied me, and explained to him why he needed to meet me.

He used the trust that he had built with that person to get me an audience, not just a phone number.

In truth, I’m not sure if this is the 4th rule or just the sum of the previous two. If you are always building your database and you’re following up with everyone, then you will have built the trust that’s required to tell one person they need to meet another. That’s a referral. If you want to be an invaluable referral partner, then give referrals, not leads.