How to Make Your Network Work for You

1:58 PM Thursday February 18, 2010

by Ariana Green |

Many people turn to networking when they're looking for a job, but the best time to build your network is before you need something; and the best time to keep that network strong is always. But what is the best way to do that? Simply collecting business cards and attending events may expand your number of contacts, but does not increase the likelihood that those contacts will benefit you in the future. To reap the benefits of networking when you need them, you must know how to make your network work for you, and how you can work for your network.

What the Experts Say

The most universally agreed upon networking tip is this: Offer to help others first, and they will return the favor. "You should always ask new contacts to tell you about a business challenge they are confronting," says Dr. Ivan Misner, PhD, lead author of Networking Like a Pro: Turning Contacts into Connections, and chairman of global networking organization BNI International. "That way, you might know someone who can help, and that's the start of a relationship."

Misner teaches his clients to focus on gaining credibility, which grows, he says, when they keep appointments, act on promises, verify facts, and render services. "Failure to live up to expectations — to keep both explicit and implicit promises — can kill a budding relationship before it breaks through the ground," he warns.

Networking well makes for a brighter future, so Misner advises people to think beyond a current need. "People tend to forget about the importance of long-term credibility because they're so focused on making an immediate sale," Misner says. "But with that approach, you only eat what you kill that day." Focus on becoming known and trusted instead; a long-lasting relationship is more beneficial to both parties.

Lillian Bjorseth, author of Breakthrough Networking: Building Relationships That Last, reminds her clients to share information. "One of my favorite follow-up methods is to send someone a relevant article, photo, anecdote, marketing tip, or other resource via email," she says. Follow-through on seemingly unimportant

promises or casual conversations can be just as integral to business success as delivering a reliable product.

Make People Know You

It's not enough to be an expert on something if nobody knows you well enough to think about calling you. Creating an inviting image for yourself can generate business and opportunities. "Our research shows that people are much more likely to call if someone is not just an expert but also has initiated some sort of social exchange to make others comfortable," says Noshir Contractor, professor of behavioral sciences at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, who has done research on social and knowledge networks.

While Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and other online networking sites can become time drains, online networking is useful for strengthening connections. By posting Facebook or Twitter links to relevant articles, you can provide value to your virtual friends and show your engagement with pertinent business issues. Writing original articles or posting commentary keeps you on other people's minds and enables them to see how involved you are in your industry. It is an efficient way to continue a relationship with those you know.

But online communication is not enough, especially for newer contacts. The true benefit is that it often leads to in-person contact because people feel more comfortable initiating a meeting with someone they "know" electronically. It's especially important to seek and accept face-to-face meetings with newer contacts because technology can never match a human connection. In-person check-ins are useful for contacts you already know too, but given people's busy schedules, it is most pressing to push for personal meetings with contacts you haven't spent much time with outside of a group gathering.

Think About How People Feel

Understanding psychology — your own and other people's — should factor into your strategy. "Some people are really busy and harried, or they're not quite as affable," says psychologist James Waldroop, an author and CEO of Career Leader, an internet-based career assessment used by corporations and business programs worldwide. "The point is to read your audience and know to make contact with some people less frequently."

But, Waldroop points out, even the most curmudgeonly contact appreciates genuine offers of help. It's important to make emails and phone calls feel personal. For example, you could send an email saying, "I know your kids are getting out of college soon, so please let me know if I can be of help to them, even remotely." Or else something like, "I was thinking about you and remembering the time that we did such and such, and it made me laugh." Or perhaps, "I've heard through the grapevine that your business is having trouble, and as you know, I've dealt with this before, so please do call me if you want to vent or strategize or anything else." In addition, he suggests that an appropriate

level of humor is a great way to emphasize that you are being genuine or to make people feel comfortable.

Waldroop also offers that in certain cases it may be best to call after hours when you know the person won't be in the office to pick up the phone. That way you can leave a message, which is less intrusive, and you won't get interrupted before saying what you need to say.

Grow and Maintain the Network
In building your network, Professor Contractor believes that it's vital to reach out to a diverse pool of people. Those who come from different fields, different socio-economic backgrounds, and different countries can offer creative solutions and contacts that a colleague in the neighboring cubicle cannot.

Contractor has his students engage in the following exercise to assess how well a person maintains her network: Students come up with a list they call their Board of Directors, a roster of people they know whom they can call up on important professional matters. Contractor then prompts his students to write out who introduced the people on the roster to the student. "They will discover that, often, there are just a handful of people who introduced them to the most important people in their lives," he says. "These are people who ought to be cultivated because they are helping to broaden a network. One must make sure to continue to connect with those people."

Some of Contractor's students go through this exercise and find that they have been introducing themselves to their most valuable contacts. "That's not a good sign," Contractor says. "That means you're not using your network well and you're not tapping into the virtuous cycle."

Principles to Remember
Do:

- Be genuine to gain credibility and keep long-term relations
- Feed the network (via Twitter, Facebook, emails, etc.) to pass on useful information and show you are engaged
- Offer to help using humor and tact

Don't:

- Focus on getting something from a new contact immediately
- Hide behind technology and avoid face-to-face networking
- Forget to read your audience and provide a personal approach

Case Study #1: You Never Know Who Can Be Useful
When she was an executive at Allbritton Communications, Mary-Claire Burick, who is now president of her own strategic communications firm, went to a D.C. Chamber of Commerce event and was seated next to the associate publisher of DC Magazine. "I didn't think much would come of it at the time, but I thought I'd keep in touch in the spirit of networking," she recalls. Instead of just talking about superficial topics, she steered the conversation toward specific business issues and scheduled a follow-up meeting. In return, he invited her to company events where they continued to talk. Her strategy was to be generous with her contacts and to get to know the magazine community's interests. A few months later, the publisher and Burick ended up having the idea to create a segment for a show Burick's company was launching. "We were able to brainstorm successfully because we had cultivated our relationship," Burick said. The editor from DC Magazine would appear every Friday on an Allbritton television program, helping Burick fill content spots and giving DC Magazine exposure. Burick's bosses were thrilled that she was able to launch the new show on a short timeline and the editor introduced additional interviews to the show. "The relationship has also helped me in my new business because I've met new clients through magazine events," Burick says. "You just never know who you are going to meet and how you will help each other in the future."

Case Study #2: Job Search Equals Lifelong Network Creation
Meghna Majmudar was distraught when she heard the news that Katzenbach Partners, where she worked as senior associate, could no longer retain her. But a few days later, the managing partner of the firm sent her an email saying that he wanted to meet for an hour to help her strategize about her job search and connect her with the right people. By the end of the meeting, she was given five names of people he would introduce her to in the coming weeks. From there, Majmudar spent the summer honing her networking. If she attended an event, she would make sure to meet the organizer and email feedback and thanks, which at least once led to a dinner with an important person in her field. If she went to a party, instead of asking for job titles, she'd ask people about their experiences to try to figure out if she could help them. "As needed, I shared my professional credentials and tried to find ways to connect on a personal level," she says. "I realized that after a certain point of seniority, when someone likes you but has no open positions, they are really happy to offer career advice and introduce you to others." Majmudar found that by being warm and discussing her passion for her work, she could get the right power players on her side and could make use of high-level leads. "The people introducing me had a lot of cachet on their own, so I was able to draft off their value in my conversations." After three months, Majmudar landed a job she describes as "great," and felt a renewed sense of confidence. "After a summer networking, I have so much more energy and resources to draw upon for future projects," she says.