

Never Stop Networking ... Especially When You Are Employed!

by Lillian D. Bjorseth

Cradle to grave security is gone. The new AT&T will never be called “Ma.” Your key to controlling your career and your destiny is to build high-value relationships. You’re in charge. The question is, “What are you doing to insure your future?”

People like to hire and do business with people they know and trust. It helps if they like you; however, that’s not as important as the confidence or warm and fuzzy feeling they get from already knowing you or being referred to you by someone who does. However, just knowing people isn’t enough. You need to meet and develop and maintain relationships with the right people.

When you are in transition, you have an affinity with the word “networking.” You know you are supposed to do it because outplacement firms, coaches and even your family tell you so. Then you land a job, and you get so caught up in it 24/7 that you forget networking is a valuable lifetime process.

I experienced this firsthand in the late 80s at the first A&T where people had joined the Bell System “for life.” When the down sizing started, many employees (who had left promptly at 5 pm daily to do their own thing) asked me what this “networking thing” was about.

And, not all of them learned the first time. An attendee at a workshop I was doing for an outplacement firm told me he regretted that as a speechwriter for a Bell executive he didn’t use that time to build relationships. “You would think I would have learned,” he said. “I didn’t. This is my second time around since I was let go from Bell. I guarantee you that now I’ll do everything I can to make it the last time.”

Far more than glad-handing and giving out business cards, networking is a strategic art that depends on a thorough knowledge of the process and good communication skills.

First and foremost, you need to determine whom you need to meet to help you find a job or climb the ladder internally and then how and where to meet them. And, if you are employed, you need to have both an internal and external relationship-building plan. You never know how long that job will last!

I. What to do Before You Work an Event

a. Create a Plan

We network for four reasons: Advice, Information, Referrals or Recommendations and Support. Your relationship-building plan helps you focus on what events to attend and why. It also helps you debrief after each event to further focus your efforts.

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- i. What is the focus of your business or career?
- ii. What is your main function?
- iii. How does what you do benefit your employer/customers/clients?
- iv. Who is your target market?
- v. Where can you meet them?
- vi. Where can you meet people who can introduce you to them?
- vii. Whom do you want to add to your network?

b. Become a Student of Impression Management

People decide 10 things about you within 10 seconds of seeing you. It is based on your image, a combination of appearance and behavior. Every color you wear sends a message. Know what impression you want to create and how to create it. Do you want to say authority, responsibility and knowledge? Then, wear navy blue. Successful? Then wear darker gray. Dependable, practical, stable – brown. Powerful, dignified, sophisticated – black.

Always check out the company's culture and that of the department you would be working for before deciding what to wear for an interview. When I was at Bell Labs, management and engineers had very different dress codes, and it would have been a faux pas not to know that when interviewing.

Keep in mind that a suit jacket with long sleeves, slightly padded shoulders and a collar makes you look one-third more powerful. You can always take the jacket off in an interview. You can never add it if you didn't bring it.

Body language also speaks before you open your mouth. Your posture can bespeak confidence or the lack thereof. Eye contact needs to be steady without being too piercing or too weak - maintain it at least 80 percent of the time. You can look down or away in thought; however, you need to return your gaze to the person's face within seconds. Learn the meaning of different handshakes, and how to react to them.

c. Know Your Relationship-building Strengths and Limitations

Use a behavioral assessment tool such as DISC to know where you excel in the networking arena and where you need work. Just as importantly, learn to read others so you can network in their style and quickly help them feel comfortable.

If you are naturally confident like the Dauntless style and have a powerful stance, handshake and eye contact, ease up a little, lest you overwhelm others. Indefatigables, curb your natural enthusiasm and desire to do almost all the talking. You'll benefit more from listening more.

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Supportive networkers, push your comfort level, and talk with three or four people, rather than just the one who makes you feel safe. And, for those of you with a Careful style, be less stoic and react more. People may think you are aloof, don't care and don't want to be bothered with small talk, and therefore, relationship building in general.

d. **Create an Effective, Useful Verbal Business Card**

You all know what an elevator speech is. However, you need a front end to that pitch to inform and intrigue people in networking situations.

That's why I created the Verbal Business Card (VBS). It's only a sentence or two. That's all the longer you have to grab someone's attention. It is also the length of time that is proper for you to speak before giving someone else a chance. Your VBS also helps you hone in on your top-of-the-mind positioning, a must for every professional, as it influences the direction of your marketing efforts.

Your VBS needs to be laden with benefits. People are most interested in how what you do affects or helps them. The VBS focuses on *what* you do, not *how* you do it or *who* you are. Use active verbs, the most powerful words in the English language.

In your generic VBS, don't include your company name (unless it is universally known), your company location, your title, labels such as speaker, trainer and go easy on adjectives and adverbs.

You want your VBS to elicit the question, "How?" That's when you can launch into all the things you are itching to say, i.e. your elevator pitch.

You may need a different VBS for your industry and internal company use.

II. **How to Work the Event**

My 10-Minute Rule for Working a Room breaks down into an introduction, body and conclusion. The *introduction* is for small talk (a misnomer since this lays the foundation for the rest of the conversation) and possible business card exchange. Remember business card etiquette: If you want someone to have your card, ask them for theirs first. If they do not ask you in return, why give them one? Their silence in this area has spoken loudly!

The goal of the *body* is to find a commonality. Have your "ask-for" questions prepared so that you can determine quickly if you wish to pursue building a relationship. Equally important are your "listen-for" answers, again, so you can determine if you wish to move to another level.

The *conclusion* ends the interaction, and for some it is as hard as starting a conversation. Plan endings just as you plan initial words. This helps you politely end one encounter and move on to the next. The person you are speaking with is probably eager to move on, too.

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III. What to do After the Event

You will immediately stand out if you do what you promised. This separates those with integrity from those who merely say they will do something.

While there are myriad ways to store your information and follow-up methods, what is most important is that you choose the one(s) that fit the other person's preferences and behavioral (DISC) style. You need to know if it's e-mail, a letter, the telephone or lunch. Know whether to talk about the weather or get right to business, whether to meet in their office or a restaurant. Gauge the right amount of time between contacts and how often to pursue others.

People like to be treated in their style, not yours, and as the sales person (and we all sell all day long!), it is up to you to adapt to each situation.

Happy networking!

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