

In Networking, Making Introductions Pay Off

By Jon Jacobs Aug 2 2007

When people think about networking, they usually put it in the context of meeting other people. But when you're out there developing a group of contacts who can help you with advice, job tips and raw information about potential employers, it's important to remember these same people are looking for you to help *them*.

How do you do that? One way is to link them up with other people you know. "That is a very critical piece of the networking process, of giving back to the people in your network," says New York career counselor Phyllis Rosen. "In order to keep a network alive, you have to be able to return that favor."

Every introduction you make adds value to your network. "When you connect two people who click and maybe do business, you become more valuable to them," explains Chicago-based business networking expert Lillian Bjorseth. "They remember you."

In fact, if you do it right, becoming a master of the introduction can make you the well-connected hub of the circles you move in.

"A hub is a super-networked individual," says Adam Kovitz, chief executive and editor-in-chief of the National Networker, a Web-based newsletter and portal for networking activity. "When you become the hub, you're the person who everybody goes to."

Don't Go Overboard

However, there's an important caveat: A person who introduces acquaintances indiscriminately will actually damage his or her network. People who regularly return your calls expect you to exercise reasonable care before disclosing their names or contact information, referring a third party to them or vice versa.

"People will be hesitant to be in your network if they think you're going to give out their name helter-skelter," warns Bjorseth. "It's good to connect people. Just be sure you know what you're doing."

Here are some expert tips for safe networking:

Don't Give Referrals to People You Barely Know

Until you've invested time getting to know a new contact, you have no basis to connect them with anyone who trusts you. In that case, a referral within your network is a shot in the dark. If the new acquaintance proves unsuitable - or worse, shady - the person you referred them to will blame you. Says Bjorseth: "When I connect two people, they're more likely to connect, because I know both of them."

Don't Solicit Referrals from People Who Don't Really Know You

Job candidates sometimes ask for introductions from people they just met at networking events, or whose profiles they found on [LinkedIn](#) or similar networking Web sites. Experts say those referrals are pointless, because a new acquaintance knows nothing about your ability, even if you send them your resume.

Gregg Berman, head of risk business at RiskMetrics Group, says the best way to get introduced to a decision-maker is through a former colleague. Such individuals can honestly vouch for your competence. Even a highly placed personal friend can't do that, Berman notes. As much as they might like you, your friends know that if they got you a position and you failed, their own credibility would suffer.

Meet New Contacts Face to Face

"I'm very much a believer that you need to see the whites of their eyes at least once in order to start building a relationship," says Bjorseth. E-mail is fine for maintaining contact beyond the initial phase, she says, but many critical behavioral qualities - such as a person's promptness and body language - can only be observed when you meet in-person.

Listen

Asking the right questions, and hearing the answers that come back, is often the key to knowing whether and with whom to follow up. For example, Bjorseth says a person entering a new career or specialty could ask a contact, "If you were in my shoes, who would you work for?" After the relationship has deepened a bit, you could ask, "Do you know somebody who works there?"

Be Flexible, But Loyal

Above all, never lose sight of the fact your network is your most valuable career asset, and requires time and effort to nurture. A network resembles a mutual fund, says Kovitz. "They're dynamic, always changing, adding and subtracting from their portfolio."

However, Bjorseth believes most of a network's value stems from its sturdiest, least fluid members: a tight circle of no more than a dozen time-tested allies whom she labels "oak trees." Because such relationships develop gradually and over time, their number is necessarily limited. So take care not to overcrowd this part of your network, or violate the trust of anyone in it, to attain some short-term benefit.