A Good Network
Is A Circle of Friends
By Nick Corcodilos

The Basics Of Good Networking

In lots of professional circles "networking" has come to be regarded as a necessary skill that leads to new jobs and new customers. I prefer to regard it as an enjoyable social practice that enriches my life. Therein, I believe, lies the difference between bad networking and good networking.

Have you ever had an old contact call you when he's job hunting? Suddenly an otherwise casual, friendly person turns into a preoccupied motor-mouth who makes you wish you'd let voicemail take the call. That's an example of bad networking.

"Networking" is an unfortunate term because it implies connections but ignores the importance of true relationships. Networking isn't about the quantity of contacts you make; it's about the quality of relationships you enjoy.

Let's take a look at what's wrong with the conventional notions of networking practices so we can come up with a simple approach to good networking.

Don't speculate for a job.
The way lots of people "network for a job" reminds me of day-trading in the stock market. The networker has no interest in the people or companies he's "investing" in. He just wants a quick profit. He skims the surface of an industry or profession, trying to find easy contacts that might pay off quickly. This is what networking meetings (or so-called "business card exchanges") are usually all about.

When you encounter an experienced networker, you'll find that he listens carefully to the useful information you give him, but once you're done helping, he's not interested in you any more. He might drop some tidbits your way, but don't expect him to remember you next week.

Invest in relationships.
Contrast this to someone who reads about your company and calls to discuss how you applied an old technology to produce new results. He's interested in your work and stays in touch with you, perhaps sending an article about a related topic after you've talked.

This initial contact might prompt you to one day call your newfound friend for advice, or to visit his company's booth at the next trade show and introduce yourself. Maybe it never goes beyond that, or maybe one day you'll work together. The point is, after a time you become known entities to one another. You become members of one another's circle. You'll help one another because you're friends, not because "it will pay off later".

Belong.
People trust other people they know. Why? Because "getting to know you" takes a long time. This approach to business reveals integrity and it reveals patience. People who have made that kind of investment in you are usually worthy of your trust. They're the kinds of people who can refer their buddies to you -- and you're glad to make the new acquaintance, because you are all part of the same circle.
People in your circle are people you would hire or go to work for. If there's a catch to this, it's that you have to invest in getting to know them first. That's what makes a really good network of people so difficult to become a part of. It's also what makes it so desirable to belong to.

How to Initiate "Insider Contacts"

Most job hunters freeze at the thought of picking up the phone and calling someone they don't know. They'd much rather write a stiff, formal cover letter that ends with, "I'll call you in five days to schedule a meeting."

Right. Thanks for the warning. I'll make sure to be out of my office when you call, because I don't know you from Adam.

Let's take a look at some common mistakes people make when they try to open new doors, and then we'll try some new approaches that might work better.

Make friends before you need them.
Here's a phone call we've all gotten from someone we barely know:

"I'm looking for a job. Who do you know at Superfluous Systems, Inc?"

Why should I refer you to someone I know, if I don't know a darned thing about you? What if you turn out to be a jerk?

If you instead present yourself as someone who's busy working on projects related to my own, I might help you because you've given me a way to form a judgment about you:

"I just read the article about your company's technology. I've tried zamming the frammitz, but your method seems much more efficient. How did you get the output up so high?"

That approach focuses on something we have in common: the work we both do. You're not asking for a job lead. You're opening a door, and you may have found a new buddy who is likely to give you some useful advice. On the other hand, if you're just buttering me up because you need an immediate favor, I'll smell the butterfat on your breath through the phone.

Learn to meet people when you don't need them. It'll keep you honest.

Seek advice, not help.
No one wants the "Can you help me find a job?" monkey on his back because the monkey requires feeding and lots of attention. That's why most people you ask for help will quickly transfer you to the personnel office.

On the other hand, if you approach me for advice rather than help, that's something I can provide without fear of commitment.

"Your friend Joe is part of the R&D department here at Advanced Software. We developed the helical zeebie last year. He suggested I give you a call. Joe says you've been working on frammitzes over there at Superfluous for a long time, and you might be able to give me a little advice. I've been thinking about moving to the frammitz side of R&D. I realize there's probably a lot I need to learn. Can you suggest any good professional studies programs or texts that you think are worthwhile?"
Uh, sure. You probably already know about streaming halfbits, so you probably wouldn't have any trouble getting through the new edition of Smith's book. So, you worked on the zeebie, huh?

Where you take the discussion from there is up to you. The point is, you've broken the ice with someone who might be willing to go so far as to escort you through his company, if you want the "cook's tour".

**Give before getting.**

It astonishes me that people really expect others to cough up valuable help and personal introductions without offering any value in return. Even a child knows that if you want something, you should first put something on the table yourself. Or, at least, make your request one that will produce a clear mutual benefit.

"Here's my business card. Call me if you hear about a job opportunity, okay?"

Sure. I'll put your card in this special circular file, right here beside my desk, so I'll always know where it is.

Does it occur to you that you have contacts that might be useful to me? Maybe we could be buddies if we promote one another's agendas. Suppose you approached me this way:

"I just saw the campaign you produced for your company's hannelframmis product line. I'm in charge of workshops for the Marketing Experts Association and I wanted to ask if you'd consider doing a short presentation for our members next month."

Suddenly, we're working together on a project and you've given me an opportunity to become more visible in our industry. Suddenly, we have a good reason to talk more. Maybe you're actually just baiting me in the hopes of getting a favor in return. But, if you're really smart, you're just forming one more relationship among many in our professional community, and that's how opportunities grow.

When developing insider contacts, these conversations require follow-up, time, effort and your sincere interest in another person's work. The last example requires that you be very involved in your professional community, and that takes a huge investment on your part.

Decide to make the investment, and you will see wonderful returns. Just remember that useful professional relationships take time. You may even have to meet some of the people you talk to for lunch or a beer -- for "no good reason at all". Is that such a bummer?

If you want others to open doors for you, open the door to them first. Give before you expect to get, and you will develop a good network: a circle of friends who will always be glad to help you because you're one of them.

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