



Networking: Not just for job hunting or conferences

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A colleague of mine recently got a phone call from someone she hasn't heard from in three years. This person had lost a job and was reaching out to anyone in his network -- past and present -- to get leads. Although my colleague was sympathetic, she had less incentive to help this person because he hadn't connected with her in a while. She couldn't honestly vouch for his experience or character. She didn't know him anymore.

While it seems that building networks is as easy as clicking the "accept" button and tallying up your cyberspace pals, deep down we all know that there is a big difference between a pal and someone who really supports your business and career.

Everybody focuses on networking when times are tough, but smart professionals pursue networking consistently to gain high-impact connections and opportunities. Beyond proper handshakes and nice business cards, professionals with the most successful networking plans understand that they gain influence through giving. Here is what I mean by that:

Identify your assets

Everyone has skills, knowledge or information to share. What are those things for you? Is it a knack for organizing? Is it industry knowledge? What about financial savvy or your passion for the local restaurant scene? Make a list detailing your skills, resources and knowledge that others might appreciate. Here is an example of my list:

- Knowing a lot of people
- Getting projects done
- Keeping my word -- no matter what
- In-house accounting experience
- Writing great thank you notes
- Dressing right for the position you want

Think of business-related and personal assets. If you can make someone's life easier through your list of assets, you will build a great connection.

Choose your circles

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When you are an adult, you have the right to choose your friends and connections. Whether you are moving to a new town, taking a new job, or volunteering, select your connections carefully. Consider these questions:

- Do I like this person/group or is there something that makes me feel uneasy?
- Who are the people this person/group associates with?
- Would I be both an asset to this circle as well as a recipient of opportunities?
- Do their goals and values match my own?

Once you have answered those questions, put out your professional shingle and join the conversation, meeting or event.

Offer morsels

Do not wait for the opportunities to come to you. It is proven that active participants in a networking group, training or association gain more credibility and opportunities than those who only pay their annual dues and passively take in information.

Join committees, share your assets, encourage others to join, speak up and contribute your thoughts. Write an article. Host or sponsor something. Remember, you need to give first.

Be positive

Nobody wants to be around a negative person. Even naturally negative people do not want to be around a negative person. If you find yourself in the company of negativity, politely excuse yourself. Practice a positive attitude even if you experience challenges. Being a positive and helpful person will pay dividends in networking and in your career.

You don't have to be a doormat. If you believe that something is wrong, bring it to the attention of the appropriate person in private. Never express your negative feelings in writing, and do not backbite to others about someone's alleged mistake. Imagine that person in the room, then express your feelings accordingly. Imagine how you would like the situation handled if you made the mistake.

Build your skills

Whether you are a social butterfly or prefer your office to a networking event, it's a fact that you will need other people at various times throughout your life. A trusted professional and personal network is valuable. Take some time to build your skills for effective networking in order to move out of your comfort zone or

(for you social butterflies) to improve your networking efficiency.

You can take a course or join a group like Toastmasters, but you can also start small by offering to introduce a guest speaker, wear a certain color or bold jewelry you would not normally wear, or practice telling a joke. Introducing a guest speaker is a short and sweet way to practice public speaking. Mixing up your fashion choices is similar to putting on a networking "uniform," because it places you in another frame of mind. Telling a joke or story helps you practice keeping an audience's attention and sharing a bit of your personality.

Building your skills requires you to get out there, particularly in face-to-face, but also in online networking venues. It now takes 14 different touches or networking contacts for you to stay in someone's mind for business opportunities. Do not wait until you really need something. Reach out, give and participate today.

Other smart networking tips

1. Start with smaller groups first, or even one-on-one meetings if you're an introvert. Play to your own style. Inviting someone for coffee is a good beginning.

2. Have questions prepared ahead of time to start conversations. But don't use note cards!

3. If possible, **scan a pre-event list of participants** and choose a few people. Schedule meetings ahead of time if possible. Have some idea of what you want to talk about.

4. Introduce yourself in a new way. Instead of saying, "Hi, I'm so and so from ABC company," say, "Hi, I'm so and so and I love any kind of cheese" (or something like that).

5. Qualify people to join YOUR network. If you don't click, move on. Don't ask for a business card or drag on the conversation just to be polite.

6. Ask your qualified people to join your online network (e.g., LinkedIn or Facebook). It's sometimes easier to stay in contact that way through status updates or sharing articles and resources. But don't use this as your only networking outlet. The best networking happens face to face.

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Related resources

Are you on LinkedIn?

Expand your online network with the MNCPA LinkedIn group. Whether you're seeking work, sharing valuable information or hoping to discover new business contacts, the MNCPA members-only LinkedIn group will connect you with professionals with common knowledge and interests. Some may need your services, while others may want to refer you to a potential client or employer.

Manage your MNCPA contacts

Have you met fellow members at various MNCPA functions, but didn't manage to get their business card. Search the MNCPA online Member Directory for those you've met and add them to your list of personal contacts. Not only will you have their contact information regardless of where they go, you can also keep track of their area of expertise along with anything important you learned about them. It's the key to effective networking.

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