

## Networking: It's More About Building Relationships

Networking generates valuable links as well as a multiplying effect of personal contacts. These links can help with a person's professional advancement. They can also assist in business growth for entrepreneurs. But networking can only be effective if the mental model of this activity is about relationship building.

The term "networking" often gives people the impression that the activity is predominantly about making contacts. Reaching out to a person of interest is only the first step. Creating and sustaining a relationship is the critical factor in determining how productive and meaningful that contact will be. The strength of the bond can influence and shape the desired outcome. A contact can only be instrumental if he or she understands the reason for why an individual is initiating the dialogue. Moreover, a dialogue as well as the significance of the interaction is a two-way street. Therefore, the most effective and lasting contacts within a network are those that are mutually beneficial.

Before a relationship can materialize, the initial engagement process in reaching out and connecting with a person has to be well thought-out. The types of actions vary depending on whether the contact is through a cold call or in a participatory group, such as a conference. But both situations require some preparation and good listening skills.

If it is a cold call, there are some fundamental steps.

- Identify the potential contact.
- Research the company and industry and how this potential contact aligns with your needs.
- Provide a brief introduction of who you are and of what you are interested in and request a convenient time for short (15 minutes) discussion.
- Listen to understand – The goal of the discussion is not to solicit for a job or for a favor. It is to learn more about the company, a particular function, or the direction of that industry. Because this is an exploratory activity and an introductory meeting, it is inappropriate to provide the contact with a résumé. On the other hand, if the contact inquires about your background and requests a résumé, it is best to verbally summarize relevant experiences and suggest sending/emailing the document. By doing so, this offers two opportunities: (1) allows for time to revise or update the résumé to be more strategically aligned with the company based on the discussion, and (2) opens the door for follow-up conversations.
- Send a "thank you" note with any requested information – Remember that people are busy and an instant response from your note may not be realistic. Plan a follow up call or another email if there is no response after 1-2 weeks. Allow the same amount of time before contacting the person again should there be no response with this follow up. After two

attempts with no response, take this as a non-verbal cue to step back. Otherwise, the communication may start to appear like harassment.

If the engagement situation is through a topic-specific event or function, some preparation is also necessary.

- Research the focus or theme of the forum and the participants that this event is targeting – How does your expertise align with the attendees as well as the sponsors?
- Listen to non-verbal cues – This is important to determine who is approachable and when is it a suitable time to enter into a group conversation.
- Have a well thought-out remark about the event, function, or speaker to follow up after the introduction – This will help jump-start a dialogue.
- Observe non-verbal cues from the contact person for level of interest – Be mindful of when it is necessary to move on.
- Jot down a quick word or two about the person and conversation if you receive his or her business card – This will serve as a reminder of the discussion topic(s) when formulating a follow up email or phone call.

There are many opportunities to connect with key people in growing your professional network as well as their ability to be influential in your career or business. Identifying and developing contacts is vital to increase the awareness of your skills, expertise, and professional desires/goals. This outreach also helps to promote your “brand”. However, as with maintaining a strong brand, building and fostering relationships is not just good business sense to assure memorable longevity, but it is also necessary for career advancement and growth.

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