

Networking: It's More About Building Relationships

Networking generates valuable links, expanding and enriching one's 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. A substantive relationship can influence and offer new dimensions in thinking. But 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 background.
- Provide a brief introduction of who you are, 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 organizational 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 experience and requests a résumé, it is best to give a concise, verbal summary 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 closely aligned with the company based on the discussion, and (2) opens the door for additional conversations.
- Send a "thank you" note with any requested information – Remember people are busy. As such, an instant reply 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 reaction, 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?
- Observe the non-verbal cues of the participants – 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.
- Gauge the 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 situations 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 strategic contacts is vital to increase the awareness of your skills, expertise, and professional desires/goals. This outreach also helps to promote your “brand” – those special qualities that make you stand out. 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 essential for career advancement and professional growth.

*Clara Chow, Lead Accelerator
The Talent Accelerators*

*Join our discussion on LinkedIn
Follow us on Instagram
www.thetalentaccelerators.com*