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The Work of Networking: Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

It has been estimated that each of us has a network of 250 people. That is the average number of people you could expect to come to your wedding or your funeral.

In support of this theory, if given a little time, you could probably write down the names of 250 people – the people you know on a first name basis. So networking should be fairly simple. You simply contact the people you know, tell them what help you need and voilà, the work of networking is complete.

Alas, it doesn't work that easily. Just because you can list the names of 250 people, that doesn't mean that you can count on them to help you in the achievement of your goals.

There are a number of traditional approaches to networking. Sadly, many of them do not get the job done. In their pursuit of simplicity, they overlook the basic human condition attached to networking. The purpose of this article is to debunk networking myths, point out common mistakes and provide practical suggestions to help you build and strengthen your network.

10 NETWORKING MISTAKES

Why don't we do a better job of networking? Let's look at ten of the common networking mistakes made, the myths that perpetuate them and strategies to avoid them.

Myth #1: Business Card Blizzard

Put your business card in as many hands as possible. That's the best way to network.

Reality: Your business card is a networking tool. Like any tool, it should be used appropriately and carefully. Networking is more than simply showing your business card in front of someone or delivering your sound bite about what you do to as many people as possible. Establish a connection, create value and use your business card as a tool to exchange business cards with others in your network.

Myth #2: Techno-Networking

Take advantage of the latest technologies. With all the advanced methods of communication you can reach more people, more efficiently and with more information. In fact, done right, you might not even have to talk to people.

Reality: Technology can help you follow-up with contacts, stay in touch, respond to inquiries quickly and generally make life simpler. However, networking always has been, and continues to be, a social interaction. Without making a human connection with others, your message will not have the same level of power.

Myth #3: 'Check That Box' Networking

The best way to network is to put a few dates on the calendar and dedicate yourself to meeting as many people as possible at those events.

Reality: Networking events play an important role in building and sustaining your network. But they are only a part. People who are excellent at networking know that their network needs care and that follow-up is a critical component in the maintenance of a network.

Myth #4: 'Refer Me Please' Networking

Identify a few people who seem to have great networks and call on them when you need a referral or help.

Reality: Networking is a reciprocal relationship. People who only call on others when they need something are at risk of making important people frustrated and angry.

Myth #5: 'Strings Attached' Networking

Each time you make a helpful referral to someone, or offer a gift or service, remember to ask for something in exchange.

Reality: The people we like the best are the ones who willingly offer their help, without expectation of payment. When assistance comes with 'strings attached' the relationship (and the network) is sure to suffer.

Myth #6: Should-ing Networking

Make an effort to provide advice to people on the areas you have some expertise or experience in.

Reality: Only provide advice when asked for it. There are few things more annoying to people than unsolicited advice and being told what they 'should' and 'should not' do, however well intentioned the advice may be.

Myth #7: 'All About Me' Networking

The purpose of networking is to let people know about you. Use every opportunity to tie the conversation back to your main objective.

Reality: When the entire conversation continually centers around one person – usually the same person – others

grow tired of the interaction, even if it is interesting. Take a sincere interest in others, they will respond in kind.

Myth #8: Snob Networking

When short on time, seek out the most influential people in the room. It is a waste of time to spend time with people who can't help you achieve your goals.

Reality: While the key decision-makers are fairly easy to spot (but not always), key influencers are often difficult to identify. By avoiding certain people, cutting conversations short, or being impolite, you may be alienating someone who could enhance your network.

Myth #9: Good Ole Boy (or Girl) Networking

Spend time with people like you. Since you already have many things in common, they will be easier to relate to and will probably be more helpful.

Reality: We enjoy spending time with people like us but we learn most from those who are different. Leave your comfort zone. Meet new people. Expand your network. You might learn something!

Myth #10: 'Whatever it Takes' Networking

Getting busy people to agree to meet with you can be a challenge. Once you've identified the individual you want to network with, do whatever it takes to get an appointment. Once you're in their presence, you can reveal your true agenda.

Reality: One of the quickest ways to offend someone is to mislead them. Whether an act of omission (not being clear on your meeting purpose) or an act of commission (lying, or stretching the truth, to secure an appointment), your efforts will not be rewarded as you had hoped.

CONCLUSION

Note that in the center of the word networking is the word *work*. Developing the skills of effective networking and doing the required work returns many benefits in the future.

Consider the analogy of a gardener. A good gardener carefully tills and seeds the garden. During the growing season, he or she weeds the garden and waters it. In the fall the gardener enjoys a bountiful harvest. What happens if the gardener simply throws some seed packets on the ground and doesn't care for the garden? They have a bountiful crop of weeds! You can try this over and over again and you'll always get the same results. Do the work and you'll have a wonderful garden. Just toss some seeds on the ground and you won't.

So it is with networking. You cannot enjoy the achievement of your goals without putting forth action. Like the skilled gardener, the skilled networker knows that the results are not immediate. Yet so many of us think we can harvest a healthy bounty from a network that has not be cultivated or cared for.

Businesses don't do business with businesses. People do business with people. If we can learn to focus more on the other person and less on ourselves, we can cultivate the relationships that will ultimately form the critical links that make up our network. The success of careers and businesses depends on it.

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