

## Networking - It's So Much Fun!

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Over the course of my career so many people have told me about the importance of networking, but it wasn't until the last several years that I decided to take their advice. In fact, for a long time after hearing and reading about the importance of networking, I shrugged it off because it wasn't something I was interested in doing, didn't understand how or what it all meant and wasn't comfortable talking to complete strangers; so I wasn't about to start doing this thing called, "Networking". I'll leave that up to other people; certainly it can't be that important. Boy, was I wrong! Why or when I changed my mind, I don't know, but I'm glad I did because networking has given me the opportunity to meet some pretty incredible people.

With the way our national economy is right now (December 2008), many businesses are laying off employees while others are having to close their doors entirely. Those who unfortunately face the unemployment lines will be tapping into their network of friends and acquaintances to assist them in finding a new job. I've been laid off a few times in my career and wished I had a network to tap into to assist me with my job search. Had I been networking, I would have been able to return the favor when others found themselves in the same situation.

There are a number of ways to network. One method is known as "networking lunches" designed for people to simply meet and pass out business cards. I attended one of these events after losing a job. My hope was to meet others and see what the networking lunch was all about. Since I was unemployed, I brought some generic business cards to hand out with just my name, email address and phone number. When I arrived I sat down at a table and did not recognize anyone in the room. I have no problem speaking to strangers and carrying on a conversation so that was not an issue. (it hasn't always been that way for me) Everyone ate their lunch, chatted with one another and listened to a speaker. Afterwards, people got up and starting working the room handing out cards to complete strangers. Some people were in a similar situation as me and others simply attended to see who they could meet and expand their network.

It was literally a 20 second introduction and exchange of cards. No one really took the time to ask questions about each other. It was basically an "elevator speech" exchange. It felt very uncomfortable and artificial. I felt like I was looking for someone to take pity on me, the unemployed, and offer some sign of hope for a job or consulting opportunity. Exchanging cards without really getting to know the person seemed so pointless to me. Networking for me has to consist of a relationship with someone I've met either through email, in person, through a friend or on the phone. When you take a genuine interest in other people, you have conversations about who they are, what they do and what their interests are. This is the start of a sincere and long time friendship. Not everyone in your address book or who you exchange cards with will be a lifelong friend. Some may be strictly for the purpose of work and once either of you leaves the company, so does the connection. People in your network of contacts may be someone that you see or speak to only a couple of times a year, but you can still care about what goes on in their lives and when given the opportunity to get together, you do.

When I meet someone at a charitable, company or personal event and we talk for a few minutes, if there is some sort of connection ( and you'll know if there is or not) then I feel it is appropriate to exchange cards and keep in touch. As soon as possible after the initial meeting, I take this person's card, or a piece of paper, and write down where I met them, key interests they may have mentioned such as their favorite sports team, do they like cigars, or are they associated with any non-profit organizations etc. At a later time, when it is convenient, I enter this person's contact information and my notes into the computer or notebook. Then the next time I touch base with them or they contact me, I can look up the information and know what topics may be of interest to that person. They'll be surprised and impressed you remembered. Of course, the more you interact with them and your friendship expands, looking at notes is usually not necessary. As long as you do this with sincerity it is not a trick or technique to impress people. It is a way of helping yourself become a better and more attentive friend.

Keeping yourself and your network organized in this manner can also help you develop better conversational and social skills. For me the main reason for networking is not for the purpose of knowing people that can help me find a job or accomplish a goal; although that will naturally take place over time and you'll find that you will tap into each others talents and networks to help one another achieve a financial or career goal. What's so amazing about networking is the number of people in each others network of friends and acquaintances. For example, I may have 200 people in my address book to contact at any given time. These 200

people I know may also have 200 people in each of their networks and so on. You can see how the list expands.

If you are working on a goal and want to talk to someone about how to start a business but no one in your network of 200 people has ever started a business that could provide you with valuable insight; there may be someone in your network of 200 people that know others that have started a business (their network of 200 people) that would be happy to provide insight and knowledge on the pitfalls to avoid and the steps to success. In this case, you would ask your network of friends if they knew anyone and if so, could they introduce you via email, phone or face to face. Once the introduction is made and the two of you begin conversing, you now have another person added to your network and who knows, you may be able to help them out in the future.

Primarily networking is about building relationships, caring about others and taking a genuine interest in their lives. In turn, they will do the same with you if you have connected in some way. I now have friends all over the country that I may not see for years at a time, but we keep in touch via email or phone 3 or 4 times a year. Keeping in touch can be as easy as sending an email to say hello and asking how they are doing.

Having a network of contacts is so much fun! I enjoy meeting people and getting to know them and being able to help them out when I can. It truly is a magical experience. It's amazing how the universe brings people together in ways you could never have imagined. Not only does networking help you personally, but you get to help others achieve their goals and dreams in the process all while building relationships with one another. So, don't shy away from networking opportunities even if it seems a bit awkward at first. I'm confident you too will find the experience over time, a very positive and rewarding one.