

Networking “How To”

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Networking is so widely accepted as a necessary evil in today's world that you already know you should be doing it. But perhaps you're wondering about the who, when, where, and how of it all. How does one go forth and network?

We can answer those first few questions immediately:

Who: Everyone! While formal networking is seen as an activity for adults, informal networking is something we teach our kids from a very young age. Introduce yourself. Play nicely with others. Use your manners. Share. Find common interests. Networking skills are helpful to everyone, whether they're children interacting on the playground, high school kids seeking college recommendations and after-school jobs, or adults trying to human well.

When and Where: You most likely already know what the key events are in your field. You know, the ones that are planned a year in advance that all the movers and shakers are attending. Conferences, speaking engagements, presentations, Chamber of Commerce events, local meetups—these are all great opportunities to connect with people and to stay current on what's going on in your industry. They're also often demanding on your resources in terms of time and dollars. Perhaps you don't have reliable childcare for your kids. Maybe you don't have an employer who will give you the time off or pay you to attend. Or you can't afford to invest in attire appropriate for such convenings. Only you know what you can make work, so you'll have to choose what's feasible for your own set of circumstances. But you should also be very clear that networking is not limited solely to event-based opportunities.

Networking is interacting online—LinkedIn, Facebook groups, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest boards, etc. It's interacting IRL (that's "in real life" if you don't parent a teenager and aren't keeping up with the lingo). It's at church and the grocery store and the school parking lot and the office coffee room. It's anywhere you make it. Everything presents an opportunity to network.

Perhaps you're sharing an elevator and someone mentions being interested in finding a local person who makes 3D puzzles out of bottle caps. Do you make 3D puzzles? Hello, networking. Are you in line at your DMV and overhear somebody complaining to a friend about needing to hire an accountant to manage a growing company's finances? If you've got accounting skills and a business card in your pocket, that's an opportunity ripe for the picking.

You should always be attuned to times and places where synchronicity is at play—those instances where the help you need or the help you can give becomes clear. In those moments, introduce yourself and begin a conversation. That is the very essence of networking.

So, let's talk about the "how" of it all. How do you successfully network in a way that best connects you with a vibrant community of individuals who work together to support each other in their efforts?

Be proactive. We tend to think about networking when our personal or work circumstances are such that we find ourselves in need of help. We've lost a job (or are looking for a better one). Or we find ourselves in uncharted territory and need guidance. Or perhaps we're embarking on a new adventure and would benefit from the time and experience of someone who has successfully navigated the terrain we're now hoping to travel. And yes, each of those times is a great example of when networking can be of benefit.

But here's the secret: You should always be building your network. Partly because there's no single part of your life that isn't enriched by the company of others, and partly because the most challenging time to try to cobble together a village is when you're in crisis. Quality networking is mutually beneficial to all parties. You're not at your best in a crisis. You're more likely to appear desperate or needy and less likely to come across as someone who can reciprocate in a relationship. That's not to say you don't always have value, but perception is important, too. And let's be real: If you're really in crisis mode, your focus is (as it needs to be) on survival and not on social interactions. Being proactive means your village will be there when you need it because you've carefully and lovingly tended to it over the long haul.

Do your homework. Keep up with the latest news and trends in your field. Learn who the key players are, what they're doing, and whom they're doing it with. Read the whitepapers. Follow the influencers on LinkedIn. But also pay attention to what's missing that you may have to offer. Perhaps you have a different or interesting perspective. Or you've had success with novel techniques or approaches. That may very well be your "entrance" into a conversation and a consequent relationship.

Know (and be prepared to articulate) your value. Work that elevator pitch. What do you bring to the table? What value can you add? Whom can you connect with and/or connect others to? Need some help getting started? Try this format: My name is Randi, and I'm passionate about the use of storytelling to educate and engage the world about vulnerable populations. Obviously swap out your own name and passion (unless your name is in fact Randi and you are indeed excited about storytelling).

But don't be so concerned with selling yourself that you miss the opportunity to learn about someone else. The average person's favorite topic, although no one will admit it out loud, is himself or herself. Give people a chance to talk about themselves and you've made them feel happy and heard. Plus, you now know (if you're paying attention) what drives them and how you can contribute.





Offer your help. Networking is not meant to be purely about your agenda or what you can get out of it. You shouldn't network with motive—to get a job, to meet someone famous, to make your next million dollars. It's not about the destination; it's about the journey, a trip that's always better in the company of others. You should be networking to expand your village and to support others in achieving their goals. Maybe you will end up with a job or a famous friend or a better bottom line for your business. But that should be a happy side effect, not your end game.

You have more to give than you believe you do. Maybe it's experience or education. Perhaps it's a fresh take on your field, or an introduction to your first cousin's wife's brother's neighbor. Maybe it's about something that's not related to work at all (like that one guy who's struggling with how to deal with a cranky teenager when you've already survived raising teenagers). Don't underestimate your value. Give your help freely. Do it because reciprocity is important. Do it because people will bend over backward to help someone who has helped them. Do it because it doesn't matter whether you get anything out of it or not.

Rethink whom you're aiming to connect with. Resist the urge to seek out connections only with those who have advanced degrees, high-paying jobs, or fancy titles. What's most important is what you value, what you're interested in, and what direction you want to go. The people who can help you (and whom you can help) may not have already "arrived" at that destination, but they have the passion, commitment, and enthusiasm to be real difference makers. There's no wasted introduction. No one is without merit or value. When you're invested in creating opportunities rather than finding out who can do what for you (see above), you open doors to all kinds of possibilities.

Networking doesn't have to be all about work or your business or the business you're hoping to launch or the company you're hoping to get an interview with. It can be about what makes you feel alive, how you like to spend your free time, or even what your weird hobbies are (that are PG-friendly). For all you know, your love of pig farming on the weekends may connect you with someone working on a new formula for pig food, and the next thing you know, ta-da! Future business partners (or at least a cool person to share your hobby with).

Step outside your comfort zone. If you stick to your circle, your field, your interests, know who you'll meet? The same group of people again and again. Diversify your network. Be open to events and opportunities that extend beyond your interests. Grow your village!

And remember, the beauty of networking is that it's not just about whom you meet or come to know—it's everyone they know, too. That is how you increase the value of your network exponentially!

Be authentically you. Fake it 'til you make it is a great strategy if you're not a morning person but you still have to be at work early in the A.M. It's not a great strategy for building a network. When you show up but aren't authentic, then that community you're putting together to help each other be the best versions of themselves? They don't even know who you are.

Being professional doesn't mean you have to be a clone. Nobody needs a copy of him or herself; that role is already filled. Be original. Be quirky. Be funny. (If nothing else, you'll be memorable.) But also remember that while it's great to be interesting, you need to be interested in other people, too, or you're wasting everyone's time.

Now pay attention because this is the particularly important part. When you've done all of the above—when you've been proactive and self-aware and helpful and open-minded and authentic—you've only really started to network. The key is to sustain those efforts. Networking is a long game. Having a conversation and exchanging business cards is great. But relationships aren't merely introductions; they're what develops from growing them. That's the part where you follow up with each other after meeting. Where you make the phone calls or send the emails. Where you remember you promised to send a link to that interesting article you were discussing and then you actually send the darn link. Where you remain in touch and continue to find ways you can provide value to each other. That is some networking mastery.

