



In Search of a Captive Audience

Networking Should Be a Daily Event for Today's Manager

In my July article, I covered the basics of networking. Now let's move to the opportunities for networking. Finding varied sources for expanding networking opportunities is just as important as making the effort to network.

Civic and community groups always need volunteers for projects. I love the approach that Habitat for Humanity uses to get volunteers and place them in their area of interest. I got a letter thanking me for my support with a questionnaire asking me which areas suited my fancy for volunteer work. Whatever your area of interest, the need for competent, committed volunteers abounds everywhere.

Remember, we initially defined networking as the act of building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships. That mutuality implies we will be giving as well as receiving. Don't make the mistake of entering an activity with the "gimmee, gimmee, gimmee" mentality. It glares like a neon sign and is a surefire turn-off to potential colleagues.

Your first objective is to serve the organization for whom you are volunteering, not to self-serve. Anything else you get is an added bonus.

A Daily Activity

Beyond civic and community groups, consider becoming active in your industry's professional association. You will get to meet others in similar lines of work. You meet industry leaders and thinkers. And, you may even get the lead for your next career opportunity. The greatest benefit I have gained from being a member of the National Speakers Association are the friendships.

While I am not much of a monthly meeting person, I do love the convention

and the friends that it has brought into my life. I also like knowing I am part of a larger organization of people experiencing similar struggles and successes.

Daily opportunities for networking include planes, trains, and buses. Whenever you are commuting or traveling, be sure that you are prepared for conversation. Have some of your inventory close at hand. Be aware of daily opportunities for expanding your network. Are there a lot of people that you see on a regular basis and don't know? Introduce yourself to them; find out what they do. Be sure and tell them what you do and why you do it. Create daily opportunities for conversation. What better place than planes, trains and buses? You are guaranteed a captive audience.

And, just as you'll have a lot of captives on your commute, you can find them at the gym as well. No one will get off of his treadmill just because you start a conversation. And, you have tremendous advantage of getting and keeping someone's attention if she gets to see you nude in the shower. Well, maybe...

Be sure to have your inventory at the gym. Put your business cards in a little sandwich bag and wear a small fanny pack. If that's not your style, get T-shirts with pockets.

Remember, the gym is an acceptable place to wear clothing that advertises your products or services. Slogans on athletic gear can spark conversation. However, do not make the mistake of selecting risqué or revealing athletic wear. You will be sending the wrong message. Create opportunities for connections by being creative in your approach to fitness apparel.

Beyond the gym, there are always structured networking events like those

offered by the Chamber of Commerce. Chambers offer a myriad of social activities geared toward lead-sharing and networking in general. Use these events as regular sources of business development. Be sure to focus your energies at these often crowded, busy gatherings.

Maximize your impact by being clear on your reasons for attending. Are you there to meet particular people? Are you there to build visibility for yourself and your products? Or, are you there to close deals with certain prospects?

Whatever your reasons for attending, keep them in the forefront of your mind. And remember, Chambers of Commerce help create growth for local businesses. Lend your support whenever and wherever you can. You will be doing your part to keep your local economy flourishing.

Conferences and conventions present countless opportunities for building your network. Attend these events not just in your own industry, but also in related and target industries. Make learning your first priority. Soak up all of the knowledge that you can. This will enable you to converse more intelligently when talking with new.

Strike up conversations with other learners in the sessions you attend. Like you, these people are interested in professional development. One of the intangible benefits of networking is the regular opportunities for ongoing learning.

Conferences and conventions generally feature tradeshows chock full of exhibits and exhibitors. Make it a point to visit these events. Meet vendors and reps. They can provide wonderful education about their products and services. You may be able to create partnerships with colleagues in related industries. You may create new alliances just by being visible (and likable).

If you happen to be representing your company at one of these activities, focus on meeting and greeting. Have something interesting to draw people to your booth. Chocolate works well for getting and keeping my attention.

When it's over, send a personal note to follow up with your new colleagues. A favorite networking technique of mine is to send new colleagues articles that may be of interest. (Hey, why not send this article to some of your prospects?)

Network Expansion

Network expansion is a never-ending process. The strategies are infinite. One of the best things that I ever did for my own network was to join a Master Mind Group. This concept, originated by Napoleon Hill, author of *Think and Grow Rich*, is relatively simple but unbelievably powerful. So much so that I belong to two of these groups. (I admit, I'm a little obsessive.)

In a nutshell, a Master Mind is a group of like-minded people, not necessarily all from the same industry, who meet however often they deem necessary. One of the groups I belong to meets monthly, the other quarterly. We discuss relevant business topics and share opportunities, leads, and the like.

The quarterly group requires each member to develop a presentation on a topic of their expertise. We each deliver very substantive presentations that benefit both the deliverer and the rest of the group.

This type of networking has been useful for me because I get to learn, question and experiment without judgement. I have also gained several marketing and business development ideas from the group.

As you start thinking about how to expand your network, consider your objectives. Why are you expending this extra effort? After you complete that task, list all of expansion sources available to you. Potential expansions sources include your alumni association, spontaneous events (last-minute luncheons and gatherings), hobby and recreational activities, or

even religious affiliations.

Once you have identified the sources, figure out how and when you can make regular contact. Remember, one-shot appearances do not build visibility. You have to be a consistent presence for people to get to know you.

Now identify the contributions that you can make to the organization. What is the unique value that you can bring? And, what are the benefits that you anticipate from expanding your network in this area?

Once you have worked your way through these preliminary considerations, go out and do something! Get active! Get moving! And, do not forget to consistently follow-up on introductions. Notes, articles, e-mails, and books make great tools for staying in touch. Be sure whatever you send is relevant to the other person. I use a Network Expansion Worksheet to track my efforts in this area. (For a free copy, send me fax with your mailing address. Yes, I still like to mail things to the people in my network.)

This notion of network expansion bears further exploration. Some people mistakenly think that a lot of quick, superficial contacts create a powerful network. Absolutely not true! I just met a consultant who bragged that he makes it a point to add at least 100 new people to his network each month. Get real!

You want to use your networking energy to build lasting, solid relationships marked by respect and reciprocity. Can you do that with 100 people each month? Use your energy to meet a few good people. Only you can determine what number of people will create meaningful additions to your network. Then start building those relationships with meaningful, regular contact.

And that brings me to my next point: building relationships. The key to powerful networking is in how skilled we are at interpersonal relations. This includes our ability to listen, relate, and remember. We have to tune in and hear what other people are saying, find something in that message that resonates with our lives, and then remember the contact.

Even more basic, remember the other person's name. Now, that's the first step. There's nothing more mellifluous than the sound of one's own name. Make it a point to recall and use names.

Remembering extends to the commitments you make. Whether it is a call you promise to make, a letter you say you will write, or a demo you are going to send, remember to honor your commitment. And, honor it in a timely manner. No one wants old, outdated information.

Set Your Goals

We have covered the basics of networking, from Mindset and Manners to Image and Inventory. These four pillars support any and every business activity we could ever enter. But they alone are not enough to create ongoing networking opportunities.

We have to find and create new ways of meeting people. We have to be aware of the daily interactions that can spark new relationships. This can happen on a bus, train, plane, or treadmill. In fact, opportunities abound all around us. We just have to open our eyes to the unmined gold. Network expansion is an ongoing activity. Think about where and how you can enrich your network. And, then do it!

Establish goals for all networking activities. Make it a point to set realistic targets for substantive contacts with new people at all of your networking activities. Maybe it will be one Chamber of Commerce function a quarter or one professional association meeting a month. Whatever your goal, it's unique to you.

Remember to be sincere and authentic in all of your encounters. No one likes a phony or an opportunist. Be yourself and be confident that you have all it takes to maximize your networking energy. Nourish your network with thoughtful words and deeds.

One final thought — pay attention to people...they are the essential element of a thriving network. **R**

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