

20 Days to Better Networking

Chris Doyle

Introduction

Whether you know it or not, you are already a prolific networker. Your network consists of everyone you know, and the length of this list would probably surprise you (try writing it out if you like. Include EVERYONE). Any time you interact with someone, you're networking. But could you be a better networker? Almost certainly. As with anything else, improvement requires practice. Since networking is largely subconscious, it can be a difficult thing to practice. So why bother? Networking is "the process of developing and maintaining quality relationships that are mutually beneficial."¹ Your network is an invaluable tool for career advancement, and just for general ease of life. A developed network increases your ability to be effective in your own job; your network stores knowledge so you don't have to. If Jake knows all about chemistry and Frank knows all about accounting, you don't have to know either of those things. You can just call Jake or Frank when you have a question.

Outlined below are twenty activities you can do consciously to increase your subconscious networking ability. The idea is that many of these activities, when repeated over time, will eventually become second nature. The activities are divided by the three stages of networking. First is preparation – readying yourself to maximize your interactions. Second is execution – getting out of the house and meeting people. Third is maintenance – keeping in touch with your network. Give networking a fair chance; do one activity every day for the next twenty days.

¹ Karen Zastudil, <http://www.gwinnettnetwork.com/articles/positivenetworking.htm>

Prepare

1. Who Are You?

People like people who are passionate. Passion trumps indifference every time, regardless of the topic; even someone passionate about something you think is boring will be an engaging conversationalist. The time demands of life often keep us from what we love to do. Rekindle your energy for your passions.

Do it:

Write down the three things about which you are most passionate (limit yourself to at most one about your job). Talk to yourself (out loud!) about these things for five minutes each. The goal is to be able to explain why you're so passionate about these things to someone who has never heard of them before. Optional: Talk to a friend or two about your passions. See if you can get them excited about what you're excited about!

2. Get Out of the House

Networking is a numbers game. The more people you meet, the more likely it is that your network will increase in meaningful ways. Continually meeting new people by keeping your social and event calendars full gives you a chance to practice your networking skills. And, studies have shown that everyone (even introverts) feel better about themselves and their lives when they engage in extroverted behavior.

You are who you associate with. Who do you want to know? Find where these people congregate. For instance: church, volunteering, sports, interest groups, industry or trade organizations, professional organizations (ASME, IEEE), trade shows, schools, or online newsgroups. Though, keep in mind that people wear multiple hats. Just because you didn't meet someone through one of these groups doesn't mean they aren't worth getting to know.

Do it:

Find two places you can go to meet people you want to get to know. Plan to go to at least one of them sometime in the next month. Write down the time you plan to go on your calendar, or someplace else where you will be reminded.

3. Set Goals

What do you want to accomplish when you go to your chosen meeting? Setting a goal will help focus your thoughts about the event. This will depend enormously on who you are, what you hope to get out of the event, etc – so think about it carefully and decide what is appropriate and realistic. Your goal may be something like “introduce myself to two people” or “ask X question to Y person.” The goal itself is almost secondary to just setting a goal.

Do it:

Write down (preferably in the same place that you wrote the note to go to the event) one specific thing you hope to accomplish when you go.

4. Conversation Starters

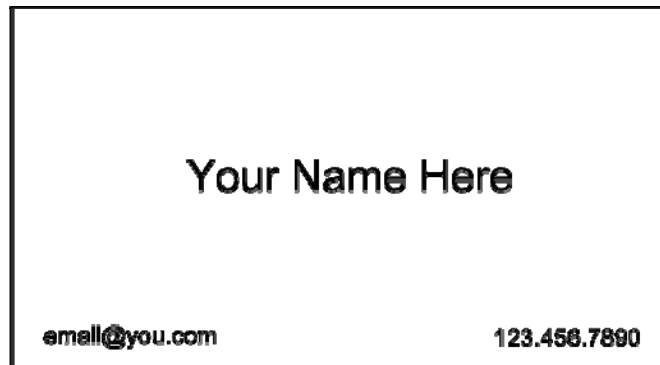
Questions are the essence of conversation. Planning a few conversation-starting questions before you attend your event will allow you to more easily start engaging a new friend. Conversation starters should be questions that you think you could ask anyone at your event. For instance, if you're going to an interest group meeting (such as a meeting of the local beekeeping society) a good conversation starter might be “How did you get involved in beekeeping?” Once you've found a few good conversation starters, don't feel the need to be creative during the event. You can use the same two or three conversation starters with everyone. It will seem repetitive to you, but not to the people you're talking to – each of them only hears the questions once from you.

Do it:

Develop three conversation starters for the event you'll attend. Practice them out loud a few times to refine and become comfortable with them.

5. Business Cards

A business card with your contact information will make it easy for people you meet to follow up with you after the event. Only the most basic information is necessary – name, email, phone. However, when you meet someone you may want to write a brief note on the card to remind them how they met you, to make it easier for them to recall later.



Do it:

Go to your local Kinkos or print shop of choice and buy a stack of business cards. Kinkos in Boston was selling 250 black and white cards for \$35 in May 2007. Carry these cards at all times, not just at a networking event. You never know when you'll meet someone.

Execute

6. Smile!

Notice how you feel when people smile at you. Wouldn't it be great to make other people feel this way too? It doesn't even matter if the other person knows why you're smiling. A smile is contagious! One day I had just played a hilarious practical joke on my friend, and I was grinning from ear to ear for ten minutes because I thought it was so funny. During that time, I passed another friend in the hall – she had no idea why I was so happy, but you could see her face light up just because I was smiling.

Do it:

Practice smiling in the mirror for 5 minutes. Smile at ten (or more!) people today.

7. Say Hi

There are always those people who you don't know well enough to consider your friend, or often even well enough to consider an acquaintance, yet you do recognize them. Perhaps you know each other's names, but that's about it. Running into these people is always awkward, because you never know whether or not you'll interact. Depending on how the eye contact dance plays itself out, you pass without a word or exchange pleasantries. It doesn't have to be awkward – make the first move yourself. Remove any doubt in either of your minds. Chances are, this person is in the same position as you – unsure of your relationship. Take it upon yourself to define the relationship as one where you DO speak when you pass in the hall. You'll put the other person at ease, put yourself at ease, and take the first step in broadening your network.

An unfortunate scenario occurs across the world every day: John takes the initiative to reach out to Eric, trying to make friends with someone who is an acquaintance. Eric, not expecting John's friendly overture, is somewhat dismissive simply because he is surprised. John leaves with a bitter taste in his mouth, thinking perhaps he made a mistake. Meanwhile, Eric is kicking himself for his reaction, because he would like to be friends with John. Eric goes back to John with a warm attitude, trying to make friends. However, John is now defensive because Eric reacted negatively, and as such he reacts negatively to Eric. Now Eric thinks John's original behavior was a fluke. John and Eric never develop a friendship, even though they both wanted to. So, don't be deterred if your first effort is rebuffed. Give it at least a couple tries, to make sure that the reaction you're getting is genuine.

Do it:

Don't wait for someone to say hello to you, and don't wait for them to make eye contact. Today, be proactive about interacting and reach out to one of these people. It's literally as easy as saying "Hi, Susan!" and smiling. Using the person's name is almost as important as saying hi in the first place, so use it if you know it.

8. Listen

People like to feel interesting. People feel interesting when you are interested in them (crazy, I know). What's funny is that people actually think YOU are interesting when you are interested in them.² So, to make people feel good about themselves and to feel good about you, you need to show genuine interest. This means asking people to talk about themselves, then shutting up and listening to them talk. The less you talk, the more interested people will think you are. Keep the conversation going by asking open-ended questions that display your interest and encourage the person to keep talking. Obviously, there are limits to this – you should do a bit of talking yourself. Just be sure to let the other person do a majority of the talking. Display some active-listening body language as well: lean forward, nod occasionally (though not

² I find this fascinating, because it means that feeling interesting and being interesting are mutually exclusive.

constantly), and SMILE! Act like you're enjoying yourself (and if you're not, you're not asking the right questions).

One of Dale Carnegie's rules is "never criticize, condemn, or complain."³ Try to refrain from making value judgments about what someone is saying to you, at least out loud. Also, never ask "why" questions. "Why" questions sound like a challenge, and "why" questions can almost always be rephrased with another question word. For example, "why did you increase the marketing budget?" becomes "how did you decide to increase the marketing budget?" You get the same information while being less confrontational.

Do it:

Start a conversation with someone you don't consider a close friend. Talk for at least five minutes (this is approximate – don't look at your watch, that's rude), mostly about this other person. Keep the conversation going by asking open-ended questions and being genuinely interested.

9. Introduce Yourself

Many times, people who are part of our normal environments are still strangers to us. You don't have to go to a networking event to expand your network – one of the easiest ways to expand your network is to simply meet more people in your normal environment.

Do it:

Introduce yourself to one stranger in your normal environment. You should have a conversation starter ready. Use open ended questions to learn something important to them (or, at the very least, learn SOMETHING about them). This could form the basis for your next conversation starter with this person.

10. Know What You Need

People like to feel needed, and by helping you they feel needed. Letting people help you with your problems is good for everyone – you solve your problem, and they feel needed. Thus, being able to clearly explain your problems is an important skill.

Do it:

Write down the three biggest professional problems you're having. Be specific! Talk to yourself (out loud) about these things for five minutes each. The goal is to be able to describe your needs clearly and succinctly, without sounding whiny.

11. Ask for Help

Now that you can communicate your needs, it's time to let some people know. This is a tricky step, made especially difficult by the fact that your close friends probably can't solve your problems. Chances are, your close friends already know and would have offered if they could help. Acquaintances are more likely to be able to help, because they know people you don't (your friends probably know each other, and thus don't extend your network very far). People like to be needed but people do NOT like to be used, and unfortunately the people who can help you the most are also the most likely to feel used. So, proceed with caution. Never expect or assume⁴ that someone will help you.

Do it:

Tell three people (not close friends) about a problem (or three problems – one each) you're having. Ideally, these people will have some expertise in or connection to the area with which you're having difficulty. DO NOT ASK FOR ANYTHING. If they want to help you, great. If they want to refer you to someone else who can help you, great. The point is just to be open about your life in the context of a casual conversation.

³ How to Make Friends and Influence People, by Dale Carnegie

⁴ Ibid.

12. The Golden Rule

Reach out to others as you would like them to reach out to you. The classic example is the new guy eating lunch alone. If you were the new guy, wouldn't you be grateful if someone asked you to eat with them and their friends? So when the tables are turned, think about how you would feel. And really, would it be so bad to ask the new guy to eat with you and your friends? Just go ask him. You've now added to your network someone who really appreciates you and thinks you're a friendly, outgoing person.

Do it:

Reach out to someone who might be feeling excluded, or at least might not be feeling included. Put yourself in their shoes, and do what you would like someone to do for you. Smile, introduce yourself, and strike up a conversation.

Maintain

13. Ten Minutes a Day for Better Networking

Networking is a continuous process. Setting a small amount of time aside every day for networking will help you integrate some network maintenance activities into your life. It is what we do every day that defines who we are – becoming a good networker requires daily commitment. Networking when you happen to remember isn't going to help you nearly as much.

Do it:

Find ten minutes every day this week you can spend keeping in touch with your network. Block off this time (whether your schedule is mental, digital, or paper).

14. Start a Database

Effective networkers generally have some sort of system to keep track of their network. The art of networking relates most strongly to the fringes of your network, specifically because these are the parts that are most likely to fall by the wayside. A database should capture personal details about people in your network such as contact info, birthday, how you met, family, what you have in common, etc. These details should be able to fully put the person in context for you.

Do it:

Many systems exist to maintain contact databases. I like Microsoft Outlook, but you can find your own system. Even just a spreadsheet will work fine. In the ten minutes you set aside for today, start a contact database and add at least five people to it.

15. Outsource Your Memory

A reminder system is the perfect compliment to a contacts database. Your network requires constant maintenance; a reminder system will prompt you to keep in touch with your network. You should use it to track how long it's been since you've interacted with each contact, as well as special events like birthdays. As a rule of thumb, you should stay in touch with each of your contacts at least once every three months. Any longer and the connection starts to become tenuous. Every contact in your database should have a three-month reminder (unless you decide on a different time period), even those people you talk to every day (so you never forget to add it when you need it, for example if you move to a different state).

Do it:

In the ten minutes you set aside for today, start a reminder system. Any calendar program should do the trick. Add at least five reminders that recur every three months, reminding you contact the people you added to your database yesterday.

16. Happy Birthday!

Remembering and recognizing significant life events of your contacts will demonstrate your interest in them. One of the most common and easiest ways to do this is to send birthday cards. Use your reminder system to prompt you to send birthday cards to your network. When the reminder comes up, buy a card and send it. It can be as simple as "Happy Birthday! I hope this year finds you happy and healthy." It's the thought that counts.

Do it:

In the ten minutes you set aside for today, add reminders for as many birthdays as you know. Set the reminder two weeks in advance of the birthday, to give yourself time to send a card. If you hate writing, try www.cardvio.com.

17. Auto-Network

You probably know someone who you could count on for a good restaurant recommendation, or advice on which laptop model to buy. Chances are, other people go to those same people for the same advice. People who are sources of knowledge are regularly sought out because of it. If you become a source of sought knowledge, people will come to you for information. And if word gets out that you know everything about XYZ, people will start recommending you to their friends. Now, people you haven't met come to you for advice because your friends sent them. This stream of new faces is perfect for expanding your network.

Typical sought knowledge includes restaurant recommendations, the weather, anything local, and who is doing what (because if I need help with something, you may not be able to help me directly but pointing me to someone who has experience in my problem area is just as valuable to me).

Do it:

What sought knowledge do you already possess? What are you interested in? In the ten minutes you set aside for today, learn something new that would be of value to other people.

18. Oldies But Goodies

Seeking out old friends, or even just people you once knew, is a great way to expand your network. You'll be surprised how excited people are to find out you're still alive even if you were never really friends. And because you do have some sort of shared experience, these people are generally very willing to reconnect with you. Many internet services can help in your search, such as Facebook, Google, MySpace, etc. This could also give you an excuse to reach out to your current network, asking around to try to track down the people you seek.

Do it:

In the ten minutes you set aside for today, seek out old friends or people you once knew. Send a note to at least two of these people.

19. Be Aware of the World

Common experiences and knowledge help bring people together. The one thing that you definitely have in common with everyone is the world around you. Staying up to date on current events will provide you with knowledge common to a large number of people. It doesn't even matter if you really know the details of a particular event, often just generally knowing what is happening is enough.

Do it:

Take your pick: Read the headlines, and pick up a tidbit or two about the major stories. Learn what sports teams are playing in the big game. Read some books off the bestsellers list, or just read their synopses.

20. Continual Improvement

Now it's up to you to take the initiative to become a better networker. You could repeat these activities, or make up your own. There is a wealth of material on the internet, and a number of excellent books on the topic. Just keep at it, a little every day.

Do it:

In the ten minutes you set aside for today, find a networking resource and learn something from it.

Resources

These resources helped shape this document, and are excellent guides to networking. Management guides often contain good information on networking, since they regularly address interpersonal relationships.

How to Win Friends & Influence People by Dale Carnegie

Skills for New Managers by Morey Stettner

www.Manager-Tools.com by Michael Auzanne and Mark Horstmann

<http://www.careerjournal.com/jobhunting/networking/>

<http://www.gwinnettnetwork.com/networkingarticles.htm>

<http://www.gwinnettnetwork.com/articles/networking-luck.htm>

Please feel free to send feedback, other resource suggestions, more activities, etc to blaimue@gmail.com.