

January 2012

Networking

Issue 16

The Art Of FACE-TO-FACE NETWORKING In a Digital Age

Twitter, email and Facebook are all great social media tools, but they are poor substitutes for the relationship building power of face-to-face encounters. Getting ahead in business requires face time. You need to increase your social acumen and learn effective strategies for in-person networking. Those who are technologically savvy, but shun face-to-face meetings because of a lack of social skills—or those who opt for electronic communication under the guise of “efficiency”—are bound to lose out in the long run.

Step Away from Your Keyboard— Your Success Depends on It!

“ ‘Schmooze or lose’ is the rule for both personal and professional success,” says Susan RoAne, keynote convention speaker and author of *Face to Face: How to Reclaim the Personal Touch in a Digital World*. And, by schmoozing, she is referring to that relaxed, friendly, easy-going conversation that connects us with others, builds common bonds, establishes rapport and ultimately cements relationships.

According to RoAne, when we use technology to avoid human interaction, we may save time, but

we lose out on the opportunity to build the bonds of trust that strengthen our connections, and we miss out on the unexpected benefits that happen in the face-to-face space. “In-person conversations are organic,” she says, “and can give rise to spontaneous information, opportunities and possibilities that would never pop up online.”

In her book, *Face-to-Face Networking in a Social Media World*, Mindy Selinger underscores the importance of using face-to-face networking to find what she calls PowerPartners, those professionals in a noncompeting, complementary industry with whom we can form bonds and build relationships that are mutually beneficial. “Look for business relationships, NOT clients, at networking events,” she emphasizes. “These are people with whom you will potentially share ideas, information and resources that will advance your career.”

Another advantage to face-to-face encounters is that they greatly reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation and result in deeper connections. Face-to-face interaction builds stronger ties than Skype, phone or emails.

UCLA Professor Emeritus, Albert Mehrabian, supports this in his findings about the communication of feelings and attitude: only 7% is communicated through our words, 38% through the way the words are spoken and 55% through our facial expressions. Phone conversations and emails are simply less effective than face-to-face communication.

Certainly, when it comes to employment, face-to-face networking plays a dramatic role. Statistics from the Right Management Manpower Group reveal that 41% of jobs are generated through networking. Another report credits 90% of all executive positions to networking. More and more companies recognize the power of face-to-face connections and look to hire those with strong networking skills. So, it pays to polish up these proficiencies.

“Don’t just network when you need something—network all the time,” says Michelle Lederman. In *The 11 Laws of Likability*, she advocates face-to-face networking because it builds authentic relationships that can sustain and support you throughout your career.

Where are the Best Networking Opportunities?

In a word, the answer is “everywhere.” Networking opportunities are all around us, both inside and outside your company: from formal networking events and chamber meetings to social events, like charity fundraisers and weddings, as well as in casual encounters at the supermarket, on the ball field, at your gym, in a waiting room or on an airplane. Strike up conversations whenever you can—you never know where they might lead.

Begin targeting your networking efforts based on your goals, advises Anne Baber, coauthor of *Make Your Contacts Count*. Do you want to gain new customers, become more visible in a particular industry, or advance to a new position? Depending on your answer, you might profit most from joining a professional association, offering to speak on a guest panel or contributing to a trade magazine. But, don’t dilute your efforts by joining more groups than those for which you have time.

Baber enforces the Rule of Six. She recommends being involved in six different networking arenas. They can be industry associations, the organizations that your best customers or clients belong to, or leisure time groups. The Rule of Six also means that you need six separate encounters with your critical contacts before you can prove your trustworthiness and competency. So don’t just be a member—be an active member!

We all have four immediate networks according to Baber: our LifeNet (family, friends, leisure time contacts), ProNet (professional contacts outside of work), WorkNet (those we work with daily), and OrgNet (people in our organization with whom we have deliberately cultivated relationships). So, to find six different networking arenas, all we need to do is look around. Reading a local business publication or a quick Web search can help, too.

“You want *quality* not *quantity*,” advises Carey McBeth, etiquette consultant. “If your goal is to gain credibility and visibility, offer to be a speaker at a conference, association or alumni event. You’ll be surprised at how many people come up to you afterwards to talk one-on-one and ask for your business card.” Consider joining a Toastmasters club to gain the skills and confidence for speaking one-on-one and in front of an audience.

Volunteering is another great way to get to know people on a personal level and build trust. As others involved in the project get to know you, they are more likely to conduct business with you or forward business to you from within their circle of influence.

Find “your people” says Patti DeNucci, author of *The Intentional Networker*. The 80/20 rule

posits that 80% of your success is created by 20% of your contacts. “You’ll want to figure out why they are your top 20%, where you met them, the kind of people they are and what circumstances built those relationships.” Jot down this information, track it and try to reproduce it. Find where ‘your people’ are and be where they are.” It may be in an informal setting; it may be at your local watering hole, philanthropic event, or leisure activity.

Also, while you’re experimenting with different networking venues, she suggests recording your impressions. Mark down right on your calendar next to the event a (+) for fantastic, (0) for okay or (–) for a waste of time. You’ll soon discover which events and organizations offer you the best networking opportunities—and which you should drop.

Get the Most out of Networking

Remember, you’re not selling! Your goal is to build long-term, mutually beneficial relationships. Following are some suggestions from networking experts:

Be intentional. Know why you are there. “A lot of the work happens before you step into the room,” says DeNucci. “Have a plan laid out in your mind in advance. Ask yourself beforehand: why are we getting together or why am I attending this event, what do I want to get out of it, whom do I want to meet, what will make this worthwhile for me?”

Bring an optimistic outlook. Go to have a good time and to learn, reconnect and meet people. “If you have a positive attitude, the room will work you,” says RoAne.

Be prepared to share. Read newspapers, business publications, blogs, books and articles.

Come to a networking event or lunch with stories to share, timely news to contribute, and ideas that make you interesting and memorable. “Otherwise, you may end up in your default selling mode,” warns Selinger, “and if you treat people as prospects they will run the other way.”

Be an early bird. Selinger arrives early to check out the sea of name tags at the registration desk. “I look for the names of people I’ve been trying to talk to or companies I’d like to connect with, and I stand just inside the entrance to greet people as they arrive.”

Let them know who you are at a glance. Selinger also advises investing in a custom nametag to use whenever possible. “Leave off distracting logos; all people want to know is: what industry you are in and who you are. Your company name should be large enough to be visible from ten feet away and your nametag should be worn high on your right lapel, above your handshake.”

Divide and conquer. Don’t sit with the people you came with; colleagues should all go in different directions. Later, you can introduce each other to the people you’ve met, suggests Baber.

Start with small talk. Begin each conversation with a comment related to the event. Get comfortable by making introductory remarks and asking questions.

Be a focused listener. Shut off your cell phone and don’t answer any calls or glance down at any text messages. Make eye contact, nod, smile, laugh and offer your full attention. Answer a question with a comment and return a question so that the conversation volleys back and forth. “Make it about them,” says DeNucci. “Remember, it’s better to be interested than to be interesting—and to be impressed rather than to be

impressive. It's not about you; it's about making the people around you feel comfortable."

Give first and give freely. But, don't give with the intention of getting something in return. Baber sits down each morning and asks herself: What am I willing to give away today? "I collect things to give away—things of interest and worth: articles, web links, and personal contacts that are of value to others." When you give a person something, naturally they want to give back. Smart networkers are also great matchmakers; they make introductions and help others make beneficial connections.

Have an exit strategy. When you realize that there is little relationship potential, make a graceful exit by saying: "I've enjoyed meeting you; I know you have other people you would like to meet and I do as well." Or, "I don't want to monopolize you..." You could also simply introduce the person to someone else and move along. If there's PowerPartner potential, says Selinger, then end the conversation with: "May I have your card? ... Let's get together and see if we can help each other develop some business." Or, "May I give you a call tomorrow? I have some ideas."

Don't hand your business card out like a flyer. Give your card only if you have been asked for it or if there is good reason to hand it to someone, says McBeth.

Follow up! In real estate it's about location, location, location. In relationship building it's about follow up, follow up, follow up. RoAne's number one rule of networking is: Do what you say you will do, when you say you will do it. DeNucci concurs, "Promises made should be promises kept."

Adam Small, founder and CEO of Strategic Business Network, equates building a business relationship with dating. "A first conversation is like a first date. You don't go on a first date and then get married." If you just throw a person's business card in a drawer and don't follow up with the next step, then you don't have a relationship.

"When it comes to follow up, find a balance between your strength (writing or calling) and what's best for the person you're trying to reach—and switch it up until you find what works," he suggests. Small uses a convenient and innovative way to stay in touch: www.sendoutcards.com, an online service that allows you to choose a greeting card, customize your message and even include a gift card. All is sent out via first-class mail; suddenly, personalized follow up becomes easy and routine.

More Networking DOs to Consider

Have patience. If you connect with someone who responds to an invitation with: "I'm busy for the next few months" or "This isn't really a good time for me," don't take this as a rejection. People have busy schedules, says DeNucci. Send them a handwritten note and let them know that you'd like to get together when time permits and let them know what you would like to talk about. "Keep the connection going and show your willingness to wait; sometimes these turn out to be our best connections."

Remember networking IS for everyone. It's not only for those in sales. The fact is you offer more value to your company when you have a large bank of resources to call upon. "For instance," Selinger explains, "you will know whom to call when you need: a source for a project, an outside opinion or an introduction."

Connect at all levels. Don't just network with higher ups. "The best leaders are those who generate people who want to follow them," says Lederman. "Every relationship counts. Find a person you connect with and build that relationship—whether it's the receptionist or the mail room clerk—but do it because it feels real. Always be authentic."

Think outside the box. McBeth believes in using creative ways to connect: walk a pet—they're great conversation starters, drop a football off at a physician's office with an invitation to a weekend game, deliver a potted Gerber daisy to the receptionist on the first day of spring. Be imaginative, fun and memorable. Listen to what others tell you. If the administrative assistant mentions her son is graduating, send a congratulatory note. Gatekeepers often feel invisible; thoughtful gestures go a long way in building their trust.

See shyness as an asset. It varies by what source you read, but generally speaking, more than half of us have shyness issues. In other words, we feel uncomfortable or out of place in unfamiliar situations. While shyness can hold us back, ironically, it can also give us an advantage. For one, introverts are excellent listeners, know how to ask questions and connect on a deeper level, points out Lederman.

Secondly, they have the ability to relate to others who are shy. Instead of focusing on your own discomfort at events, think of how you can make others feel more at ease. Act as the "host" and invite others into the conversation; in the process, you will create a more relaxed situation for yourself and others, says RoAne.

Network internally. By cultivating relationships with people throughout your organization, you

gain access to new information. It puts you in the grapevine and lets you learn of new opportunities for personal growth and advancement within your company. It gives you mentors and sounding boards outside of your own group. "Take advantage of meeting new people at corporate training sessions, on the company softball team or while working on a special task force," says Baber. "Today, we tend to quarantine workers into silos and lose that collaboration. By networking with those outside your immediate work group, you can get fresh ideas and often solutions that will help work flow better in your own department."

Can Social Networking Still Play a Role?

Absolutely! It's a great tool for both follow up and reconnaissance. "Online networking is great for finding people and allows me to broaden my reach and develop rudimentary relations," says Baber.

"I like to mine my existing database for hidden PowerPartners," says Selinger. "Then, I explore social media sites like LinkedIn and Facebook to find out more about the person and see what we have in common—so I can begin building a bond." She also posts testimonials on LinkedIn and uses blogs and other online forums to "good mouth" people.

DeNucci thinks LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter are great ways to stay in touch and fantastic complements to networking because, even with the best intentions, it may be difficult to connect face-to-face as often as we wish. Social media allows us to continuously engage with our contacts.

For instance, McBeth interacts with the people in her networks by sending out hints and tips, posing questions to them and posting polls. We can't always pick up the phone and we can't always run out to face-to-face meetings, but we can stay close with our established connections via a quick little "congratulatory" response when we learn of their promotion, award receipt or other good news via LinkedIn Updates. "Social media gives you a reason to connect without being too obtrusive," says Lederman.

RoAne uses a "surf and turf" approach to finding and maintaining her critical connections. She surfs the web to research individuals and their companies in order to prepare for face-to-face meetings and uses social media to reconnect with

older contacts. However, she emphasizes that the real connections happen not in cyberspace but in face-to-face space (turf).

It's important to master the skills of face-to-face networking in order to build authentic, mutually beneficial relationships—but, continue to use social networking in between to increase familiarity and stay top of mind. If you do all this, you are sure to gain invaluable resources and contacts that will help you achieve your career goals.

Reprinted by permission of Global Forum, Vol. 3, Issue 5.

TAKE THIS NETWORKING QUIZ!

Those interested in measuring their present skill at building relationships and learning what aspects of their networking acumen could use improvement, can visit www.contactscount.com and take a 40-item, online Networking Competency Assessment©.

Looking for a keynote speaker for an upcoming team or department meeting? -- Call Sandy or Ira at 212.243.0782.

To obtain all of the earlier newsletters and our newest products, go to our website at www.asherman.com