



Network Like a Professional

By Christine W. Zust, M.A.

So you think you know how to network. Truth be told, most people network poorly. Ask for a definition of what it is, and you're likely to get a variety of responses, like these...It's just meeting people, right? Mixing and mingling. Collecting business cards. Making mental notes about who they are, where they work, what they like to do. Networking is much more than that. Networking is about building long-term relationships. How you network with others can position you as a professional (or not). To maximize your networking opportunities, there are a few rules to follow to position yourself effectively with others.

Rule 1. Treat your network like a living organism. Your network is made up of living beings – people – who need to be nurtured just like all living things. Because networking centers around relationship building, you must learn to care for those relationships. Most business people ask themselves, “What’s in it for me?”(WIIFM). I always ask, “What’s in it for the other person? What will they get out of spending time with me? How can I help them?” With this approach, you will reap far greater rewards. Individuals who take a more selfish WIIFM approach lose every time because they are perceived as self-centered and arrogant.

Rule 2. Keep in touch. My mother calls networking “keeping in touch.” It’s the little things in life that often have the greatest impact – the unexpected telephone call to say hello, the handwritten note, taking the time to chat when you meet on the street. Keeping in touch is an art form. Do you keep in touch with people in your network only because you need something from them, or do you genuinely care about staying in contact with them? The latter of the two will keep you on people’s A lists rather than at the bottom of their lists.

Rule 3. Never abuse the privilege. If you want to use your network, that’s fine. Just don’t abuse it. There is a difference. People who use a network know the limits. They know networking requires both giving and taking, not just always taking. People who abuse their network break the rules. We all know people who fit into this abuse category. They are the ones who call you only when they need something. You haven’t heard from or seen them for five years, and now they want you to help them. They might want to use you as a reference if they are looking for a new job. They might be working for a new company and want your business. Do you see the difference between using and abusing a network? Don’t abuse your network, because you will create a bad reputation for yourself.

Rule 4. Don’t look at contacts only as business leads. People are in our network for a variety of reasons that go beyond business leads – they are there to exchange information for professional development, to brainstorm ideas, to serve as a role model or mentor. If you are networking only to get business, people will pick up on that right away. Too many people assume that just because they “know” someone, they can expect automatic financial rewards (WIIFM rears its ugly head again). Don’t be so short-sighted.

Rule 5. Break the “Let’s do lunch” syndrome. Repeatedly making promises you can’t keep positions you as unprofessional. If you promise to meet for coffee or lunch, make a note in your calendar or Palm Pilot to call the other person to schedule a date. Make a commitment.

Rule 6. Make a date with your Rolodex or database. Your master contact list is a powerful visual reminder of your network. Review your list often. See who’s missing from it, think about who you want to add to it and make notes of who you need to contact. Regularly schedule time with your contact list, to update, make changes and take action.

By incorporating these six simple rules into your networking strategy, you will begin building long-term relationships with others, and positioning yourself as a true professional -- one who cares more about others than yourself.

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