

Membership Matters

Creating Mutually Beneficial Relationships

by Randel Edwards

One of the primary reasons that people join associations is for networking. For some, “networking” conjures up negative images of forced superficial conversations, pushy people asking for favors (or a job), and business cards being exchanged at the speed of light. Those are distorted images of networking. Simply put, networking is cultivating relationships—an essential part of one’s professional career. Research indicates that the most successful people in industries are usually also the most polished at networking. In addition, a 1999¹ study indicated that two-thirds of people interviewed found their new jobs through networking. In the association world, networking not only increases your professional advancement possibilities, it also helps hone your skills, solve problems, receive encouragement, and gain friendships.

While not everyone feels equally comfortable or skillful at networking, individuals can learn to network more effectively. First, it is important to discard some misperceptions. Networking is **not** about badgering or manipulating others. It’s **not** about begging for information, a promotion, or a job. It’s **not** about whether you are introverted or extroverted. Networking is about shared interests and creating mutually beneficial relationships.

In his article “Seven Ways to Maximize the Value of Networking Meetings,”² author Bruce L. Katcher stresses the importance of networking



with the right attitude. If you attend meetings with the attitude of getting something rather than giving, you are bound to be disappointed. However, if you go with the attitude of helping others or with the goal of meeting one new person with whom to have a one-on-one conversation, you are more apt to be successful.

Some people might wonder, “How could I help others?” You can provide introductions; recommend books or websites; provide information about people, companies, or trends; or simply listen and offer emotional support.

To effectively network, individuals need to know themselves. What are your goals and interests? What do you want to know and whom do you want to know? Are you looking to expand your expertise and knowledge base in a certain content area? Do you have specific issues on your campus for which you are looking for solutions? Do you want to meet people who are currently functioning in the next position in your career path? Are you looking for a mentor? Is your goal to eventually move to another region, state, or province? The answers to

such questions will help give focus to your networking efforts and may also influence where, when, and with whom you network.

Part of self-awareness includes understanding your native inclinations toward networking. Sometimes introverted individuals feel as if they are disadvantaged when it comes to networking. Granted, it is generally easier for extroverts to initiate a conversation in person or on the phone; however, it does not necessarily mean they are the best at networking. Typically, introverts are quiet people who prefer to spend as much time in the company of their own thoughts and ideas as in the company of others. They are usually good listeners who absorb and reflect on what they hear. This can actually work to one’s advantage when networking since listening and asking good questions are an essential part of the process.

Good advance preparation can help all individuals network more effectively, especially reserved professionals. Offering counsel in an article for *CareerJournal*,³ Judy Rosemarin recommends several steps. First, acknowledge and address any aspects of networking that are barriers to you. You may need to meet with a trusted friend or family member and practice role-playing until you are comfortable. Second, create a plan and follow it. This is appropriate whether you are meeting people in person, calling them on the phone, or contacting them via e-mail. Third, contact people when your energy level is highest. If you are attending a morning meeting and are not a morning person, stop by the coffee service before beginning your networking or possibly wait until later in the meet-

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ing. Fourth, prepare in advance what you want to say and have a brief (less than 30 seconds) introduction ready. Develop some key talking points. If possible, conduct research on the people you are planning to meet or call. This way you avoid asking questions that you could answer yourself. Fifth, pace yourself. Networking takes energy so allow time to recharge.

Another important aspect of advance preparation involves the formulation of questions. Simple, open-ended questions such as, "What challenges is your institution (or organization) facing these days," or "How did you become involved in



that project?" can be a great way to initiate a conversation. Once the other person begins speaking, listen carefully and intensely. Don't focus on what you are going to say next.

With all relationships, good manners never go out of style. Good etiquette contributes positively to one's ability to network. The MIT Career Office offers the following advice when it comes to networking at meetings.

- Avoid talking too long—allow time to listen to what the other person has to say.
- Watch your body language.
- Smile.
- Extend a firm handshake.
- Make comfortable eye contact.
- Leave with the goal of meeting three people or with the names of three other individuals to contact.

If you are networking via e-mail, exercise the same good manners you would exhibit in person. There is a tendency, at times, for people's electronic communication to be more casual and informal. When communicating through e-mail, properly identify yourself and your organization and include your full name, title,

organization, and e-mail address. If someone referred you to an individual, identify that person as well. When contacting someone for the first time, you should address that person formally, as is done in good business. Behave courteously and professionally. Write simply, clearly, and intelligently. If you ask for information, be sensitive that you are imposing on the person and briefly explain why you need this information. If you want something, be prepared to offer something in return. Finally, be sure and thank any person who answers you whether you receive a satisfying response or not from them.

After meeting someone or contacting him or her via phone or e-mail, be sure and follow up. If a thank-you note is appropriate, send one promptly. Once a relationship is established, e-mail can provide a convenient way to maintain a steady, low-key interaction. Don't overdue it. Pay attention to see if your gestures or communications are being reciprocated. As part of your follow-up, take time to evaluate your interactions. What did you learn? What was effective? What next steps do you need to take? Some people choose to keep a journal of their networking. Keeping a record of your experiences can provide perspective, as well as protect you from forgetting contacts, important information, and salient lessons learned.

As a word of caution, don't limit yourself in your networking. In her article "Diversify Your Network To Reduce Career Risk,"⁴ Ronna Lichtenberg points out that one of the most common career traps is to spend all your time with people exactly like you. Diversify your network. Purposefully invest time with people of different backgrounds and cultures. Force



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yourself out of your own age range. One of the great advantages of older persons is the rich reservoir of life experiences they can offer. In the same way, younger individuals can offer the richness of their own life experiences, as well as sometimes an enthusiasm and idealism that more mature individuals may have lost.

Finally, networking is not about numbers and goals achieved. It is about the kinds of relationships that you are developing and the quality of those relationships. Done correctly, networking is not just a life skill but a natural, lifelong process. You will find yourself doing it effortlessly and spontaneously whether on the golf course, at a professional meeting, or on an airplane. In retrospect, you will realize that because of networking you have reaped countless rewards both personally and professionally.

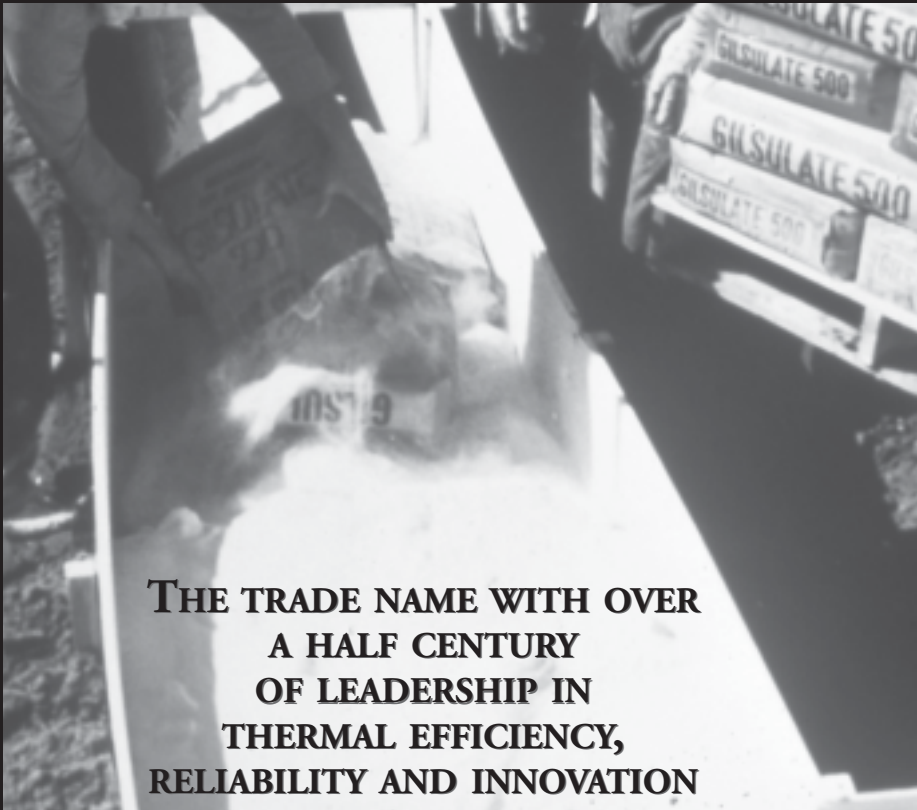
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