

Networking for Success

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Many of us network well in social settings, but miss opportunities for networking to advance our careers or entrepreneurial endeavors. This article will give you a guide to networking success.

Key 1 - Have a Strategic Plan: Figure out your career or entrepreneurial goals, and then put in place a networking plan and list of desired relationships to make it happen. For example, if you want to be U. S. Surgeon General, you could start by making a list of politicians, executives at the Center for Disease Control, AMA leaders and even former surgeon generals that you want to meet. As you make progress in your career, continually revise your goals, and your list of desired networking contacts. If you have an aggressive goal (e.g. CEO of a Fortune 500 firm, raising \$50 million in venture capital), you have to network above your current peer group. Don't take on a snobbish attitude with your current peers, but stretch yourself to meet the "high flyers".

Key 2 – Have a Giving Mindset: Before you begin the execution of your strategic plan, take on a sincere, giving mindset. Be ready to give, help, or facilitate. The goal of your networking efforts should not be immediate gain for yourself. For example in job searching, don't lead with your resume; set up 15 minute phone meeting, or better yet a meeting in person with the hiring manager. The outcome of the meeting may be that the job is not right for you, and that you may give the hiring manager a lead for the person that is eventually hired. Now, you have helped two people, the hiring manager and the newly hired employee. You have grown your sphere of influence, which will benefit you in the long run.

Key 3 - Show Up: You have to get out there. Take advantage of receptions and events held by organizations in which you are a member. Better yet, go to functions of organizations where you can find the "high flyers" on your strategic list (see Key #1). Since you have to eat anyway, use meals to move relationships forward (kind of like dating). For example, if you are new to your company's marketing department, have lunch with the engineering manager. Or, instead of eating dinner alone, attend a reception that serves hors d'oeuvres to make good use of your valuable time.

When you get there, make sure you are prepared. This means that you not only have a business card, but you also know what you have to offer (Key #2) to the people that you want to meet. Know your approach, so that you are confident as you break the ice. Make relevant conversation, and then close smoothly without monopolizing the other person's entire evening. Don't leave the conversation without a reason to follow up (Key #7).

Key 4 - Don't Be Afraid to Ask: As you already know, the worst thing that can happen when you ask is that you get a "no" as a response. If you approach each interaction with a giving attitude, and build a relationship first, you will be in a stronger position before you ask for help. Find a connection first, even if it is something as simple as the fact that you both grew up in the same state. Also, when you ask for something, make it easy for the person to say yes. For example, if you have a mentor, don't ask her to get you promoted in six months, but do ask her to coach you on how you can develop the skills that will make you more likely to be promoted by the various managers in the company.

Key 5 - Be a "Thought Leader": You want to have something intriguing to say at all of these lunches, dinners and networking receptions. Strive to be a "thought leader," especially in your particular field. When you have something interesting to say, people will remember you when you follow up with them later. Also, once you are recognized as a thought leader, you should get yourself placed as a speaker or panel discussion participant at conferences and workshops. This is free PR to build your individual

"brand", and will enhance your scope of influence in your field. Also, it is very easy to network when people are approaching *you* after your speech.

Key 6 - Volunteer Locally: With a sincere, giving mindset, get involved locally in a way that's congruent with your strategic plan. Eventually, you want to get on the organization's board. For example, I have a real passion for reaching back to help inner city youth. Thus, I have worked for about 8 years as a volunteer in Houston, Dallas and Atlanta in the Leaders of Tomorrow (LOT) teen mentoring program. The LOT program is sponsored by the National Black MBA Association (NBMBA). Eventually, I became a board member of NBMBA-Atlanta, which allowed me to meet an eventual business partner for our online business (www.MinorityProfessionalNetwork.com). Of course, I did not know I would meet an eventual business partner in Atlanta when I started the volunteer effort in Houston back in 1995. But, it did make strategic sense for me to do my volunteer work under the umbrella of a professional organization of high flyers (NBMBA) rather than through another community organization.

Key 7 - Have a Reason to Follow Up: When you meet a high flyer that fits your strategic plan, do not leave the conversation without a reason to follow up. Usually this reason should be based on something you can volunteer to do to help them. For example, if you are a young med student and you meet your U.S. congressman at a reception, ask for his card so that you can volunteer for the next campaign. Or, tell the congressman about your friend who edits an online news webzine that might want to do an interview about the congressman's education bill. Remember, the goal of your networking efforts should not be immediate gain for yourself. Ten years later, that same congressman may be in a position to help you get on an important public policy committee as you pursue your goal of being Surgeon General (see previous example). Before you follow up, ask the person how they would like you to follow up (e.g. some people prefer a phone call on Friday morning, and some prefer e-mail).

Key 8 - Follow Up: Always follow up. They "high flyers" that you want in your sphere of influence meet many people every day. Some follow up, but most don't. And when you do follow up, remember to be courteous to the person that answers the phone. It may be a secretary whose intention is to screen all calls. Be ready to give a compelling reason why the high flyer should return your call. For example, "The congressman asked me to give him a call to help facilitate an interview with a key reporter who happens to be a friend of mine. The interview may result in coverage of the congressman's reelection bid."

In summary, don't forget that networking can take place anywhere, at any time. So, be prepared and make sure you bring something to the table. Bring a business card, too. Like any other important activity, you should practice. Always be genuine, be yourself. Remember, networking not only enhances your survival, it will lead to your success.

About the Author

Thomas Brooks has published several articles and spoken frequently on the radio and in other forums. In 1998, Brooks won a national award through Career Communications Group in the "Technical Sales and Marketing" category. In 2001 he co-founded an online business, www.MinorityProfessionalNetwork.com, which provides a global Career, Economic and Lifestyle Connection™. Brooks has published a book on his adoption and reunion with his natural parents, entitled *A Wealth of Family* (www.AlphaMultimedia.com). This inspiring adoption and reunion saga delivers timely and provocative viewpoints on multicultural families and powerful insights on how to triumph over racism and poverty. Brooks lives with his wife and children outside of Houston, Texas, USA. Brooks can be reached through www.MinorityProfessionalNetwork.com/Contact.htm.