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CAREER CONSULT

Ways To Leverage Your Network

By Stephen E. Seckler

Networking is a powerful tool that anyone can master. Networking is not "rocket science." It mainly requires commitment, follow through and a willingness to be a good listener. Networking is an activity that Stephen Covey, author of "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," describes as important but not urgent.

In previous columns, I have written about effective networking techniques. If you have heeded my advice, then networking has become a regular and ongoing part of your work life.

You have adopted the habits of successful partners at your firm (e.g., meeting other professionals for coffee or lunch on a regular basis, participating in bar association and CLE activities that interest you, getting active in a trade organization outside of the legal profession).

Your focus has been on building relationships and helping others. Along the way, you have given your elevator speech numerous times; but your focus has not been on selling your services. Instead, you have honed your listening skills and looked for ways to stay connected to individuals in your network.

If the focus of networking is on building relationships, then how do you begin to ask individuals in your network for referrals? How do relationships turn into business leads? Other than feeling a sense of belonging, how can you begin to get mileage out of your network?

Once Rapport Has Been Established

At some point in any relationship, it is OK to begin to ask the other individual for help. There is no magic way of knowing when this occurs. You have to use your intuition to determine when

it feels comfortable.

There are some individuals whom you will warm up to very quickly. Other relationships need to build over a period of months or years. It depends in part on your personality and the personalities of the individuals that you meet. It also depends on the context in which you meet.

For example, let's say that you are helping to plan a fundraiser for a non-profit organization. One of the members of the planning committee is a senior manager at a software company. You are very interested in developing more business from software companies and you think this may be an opportunity to "sell" your services. What do you do?

The answer is simple. You do a great job helping to plan the fundraiser, and during the planning process you get to know other members of the planning committee. Ask them questions about their families. Find out about their personal interests. Ask them how they got involved in the non-profit organization. Ask a few questions about what they do professionally, but do not dwell on their work (unless they seem very interested in talking about their work).

At some point, either near the end of the planning process or after the event itself, approach a member of the committee and tell her you have enjoyed working with her. You are also interested in learning more about her industry and you were wondering if she might have time to meet you for lunch or coffee.

Over coffee, you will continue to be a good listener and probe for ways that you can be of help to her. But you will also ask for her advice.

Preparing For A Networking Meeting

Once you have arranged a meeting, you need to do some preparation. Find out what you can about the contact's company before you meet with the individual. The Internet has made this information gathering process much easier, but do not rule out a trip to the library.

The next thing you want to do before a meeting is to prepare a couple of lists. Gather a list of companies in the contact's industry (there are many sources for this information; for example, the Boston Business Journal publishes a different industry list every week). Look up the names of the senior management and board members of these companies and put these names on a second list. LinkedIn can be an effective tool in helping you gather these names.

When you meet with the contact, it is now OK to ask a lot of questions about his company and his professional role. Tell the contact that you are very interested in doing more legal work with companies in his industry. After you have gotten past the initial chitchat, take out the first list and show it to the contact.

This Is Not A Test

Try to avoid asking the contact if he knows anyone on the list. If he has already told you that he knows a lot of people in his industry, the last thing you want to do is to "test" his knowledge.

Give the list to the contact and say something like: "Jim, I've brought a list of companies in the medical devices industry. I don't know if it is a good list or if it would help to stimulate some ideas, but is it alright if I show it to you?" A little while later, you can take out the list of names of executives and board members that you compiled and do the same thing.

By offering these props, you will stimulate the contact's creative juices. Notice that you are not going to ask if he knows anyone on the list and you are not going to ask if he can introduce you to anyone on the list. He knows that is what you want.

Even if the contact does not know anyone on the list, the list may give him enough food for thought to come up with other ideas. You are trying to tap into the individual's recognition memory by prompting him. This is much more likely to generate referrals than relying on the individual's recall memory (e.g., by asking "do you know anyone in the medical devices industry"?).

Also, if you ask the contact for advice rather than referrals, the contact becomes more vested in trying to help you to succeed.

Most people want to help others, but they may not always know how to help. By showing the contact where your interests lie and by explaining what you are trying to accomplish (i.e., whether it is finding a job or cultivating new business), you are giving the contact a better chance to help you in a way that you want to be helped.

Reinforcing Your Network

When someone does offer to give you a referral, it is important to follow up in a relatively short period of time. If the individual has called his contact and given that person your name, you want to follow up when your name is still fresh in that person's mind.

It is also a good idea to let the original contact know what is happening with the referral. Send an e-mail to the referral and copy the referral source. That way the referral source is reminded that you are out there, the referral source sees that you are a person of action and the referral is reminded of your connection to the referral source. You can also send a letter to the referral source updating her.

If the referral leads to anything, let the original contact know about the success and thank that contact again.

Another way to reinforce your network is to volunteer to introduce people in your network to others in your network. Introduce a general counsel to some vendors that you like working with. Set up a lunch meeting with all three of you and you will be helping both of your contacts. At the same time you will have another reason to spend time with both of them.

Conclusion

Building a strong professional network is something that can take years. Like investing for retirement or college, what you get out in the end has a lot to do with what you put into it.

Furthermore, the sooner you start investing, the larger the rewards are down the road. But before you start making withdrawals, make sure you have built a strong "nest egg" of good will. If you allow your business relationships to grow over time, your contacts will be much more helpful to you when you do finally start asking for advice.

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