

PROFESSIONAL NETWORKING: A HOW-TO GUIDE



An established plan with specific goals helps in building valuable connections.

BY ZAIBA MALIK, MD

The term *networking* often conjures images and thoughts of social media. Indeed, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are powerful and convenient tools for developing and maintaining professional and personal connections. However, there is more to a network than the number of Facebook friends or Twitter followers one can amass.

Networking is defined as actively creating and discovering connections between people. On a deeper level, effective networking involves developing relationships with others, sharing relevant information, and providing mutual support on the path to reaching one's goals. And, of course, a strong network can open doors to potential career opportunities. Networking is connected to mentoring, as both involve strengthening existing relationships and expanding one's circle.

Brainstorming a list of reasons why networking might be beneficial for you is an important starting point. From there, you can decide where to network and how to use your participation at conferences and on social media to achieve your networking goals.

BENEFITS OF NETWORKING

Opportunities. A desire to expand your skill set and venture into new career opportunities is the primary reason to network. However, a word

of caution: Make sure to jump on board with the *right* opportunity, and not just every opportunity that comes your way. It is perfectly acceptable to say no to opportunities that don't align with your goals and aspirations.

Connections. As the saying goes, "It's not *what* you know but *who* you know." Networking provides great sources of connections, and it opens up doors to interactions with highly influential people whom you might not have otherwise encountered. And remember, when networking, you are not only gaining exposure to the people in the room but also building connections to their networks.

Advice and exposure. Having like-minded colleagues to talk to provides an opportunity to obtain advice on all sorts of things related to your field of interest. Networking also provides a forum you can use to promote and

draw attention to causes and interests that are important and relevant to you.

Friendship. Socialization is an important aspect of human nature. Many friendships form as a result of networking because people network mostly with like-minded colleagues.

Networking is about building relationships and sharing information. It is not about selling yourself. For example, rather than saying, "Hi, what can you do for me?" rephrase your greeting as, "Hi, let's get to know each other. What can I do for you?" It is important to adopt the mindset of giving to others and to remain open to learning more about your connections.

In terms of career and research collaborations, networking can introduce you to potential employers as well as research collaborators. Federally funded grants often prefer cross-institutional collaborations. This is an

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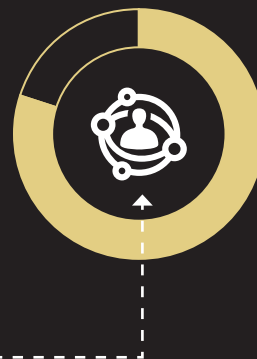




Figure 1. A name tag should be worn on the right, as a person's eyes will follow the line of sight from the handshake.

effective way to bring your work to the forefront. It is estimated that 80% of jobs are never advertised but rather filled through networking.¹ Although finding job opportunities is a valid reason to network, networking is also an effective forum for discovering professional inspirations, new projects, and career development opportunities.

HOW TO NETWORK

Below are some practical steps for effective networking.

- **No. 1: Wear your name tag on the right side of your shirt.** When we shake hands with someone, our eyes follow the line of sight from the handshake. Placing your name tag on the top right section of your shirt is better than placing it on your hip or arm, where the person you are meeting would have to search for it (Figure 1).
- **No. 2: Introduce yourself.** Keep in mind that you are trying to build a relationship, not acquire a customer. Have your elevator pitch ready, and be sure to comment on what interests you and what you can offer. Reverse your
- elevator pitch to start a conversation with another person.
- **No. 3: Approach a lone person.** It is easier to approach an individual than a group of people. If you find someone outside of a circle or standing by him- or herself, he or she will likely appreciate your coming over and initiating conversation.
- **No. 4: Use eye contact and a clear voice.** Keep in mind that smiling and eye contact can be cultural. My kids always remark that their grandparents are never smiling in old pictures. I have to explain to them that Indians don't smile—that *is* their happy look.
- **No. 5: Be intentional.** When attending a conference or an event, many successful networkers find that it helps to dress nicer than the norm. Above all, it is essential to have a plan (Figure 2). Think about your goals and current projects, and prioritize your passions. You may even find new passions as you gain exposure to others' experiences and activities through networking.

It is also advisable to take a look at the program and speakers list ahead of time. Identify a specific goal, such as introducing yourself to a particular person, or a general goal, such as meeting five people per day. One way to be intentional about this process is to use meeting breaks to connect with other attendees instead of spending that time calling the office or checking email.

Another angle is to determine your purpose for attending the event or conference. Identify your top three goals. Think about your relationships and what you need to do to achieve those goals. Consider it like the six degrees of separation: You will likely make five to seven connections before you get to the person who has a relevant opportunity to discuss.

LOGGING INFORMATION

To keep track of the information acquired while networking, it may be helpful to write down key facts about a person and how he or she connects with your work on the back of a business card (although I often misplace mine). Some people choose to carry a small notebook for this purpose, but that approach

requires constant updating and migrating of information from book to book.

Therefore, iPhone contact notes are my preferred solution (Figure 3). This section is not transferred when contact information is shared, allowing you to safely store notes about your new contact, his or her interests, and how your connection might be useful in the future.

EXPANDING YOUR NETWORK

To expand your network, think about your passions and find groups that align with them. Then, volunteer with those associations and at relevant events. Also, invest time and effort into helping others. Get outside of your traditional work environment and look into community service clubs or other local organizations. Volunteer at a practice event to be a host, committee chair, or moderator. All of these opportunities give you inside access to the other participants, helping you to establish relationships and connections with them and the committees.

Schedule time weekly to devote to your connections. If someone helps you, remember to thank him or her. If he or she introduces you to someone, be sure

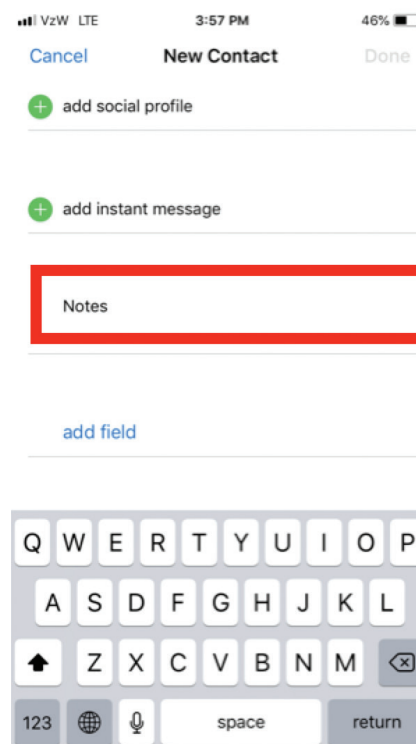


Figure 3. Notes about a new connection can be stored with his or her contact information on most smartphones.

to follow up with that person and let the original referrer know how it went. Be organized, and remember to follow through on anything you said you would do. Update your connections on your personal accomplishments—that way, when something comes up, you are foremost in their minds. Last, be patient and monitor your results over a sufficient period of time. ■

1. Dickler J. The hidden job market. June 10, 2009. CNN Money. https://money.cnn.com/2009/06/09/news/economy/hidden_jobs/index.htm. Accessed January 1, 2019.

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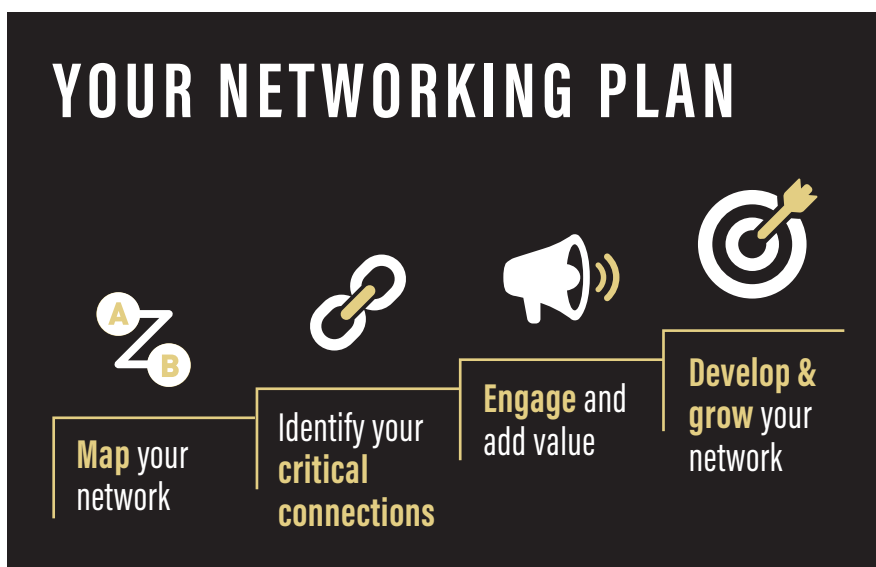


Figure 2. Before attending a meeting or an event, it is helpful to first create a networking plan.