

Networks — BUILDING ONE THAT COUNTS

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We've all heard that old adage: it's not what you know — it's who you know. Never has that line held more truth than it does in today's fast-paced, competitive world. The world we live in is a spidery web filled with strands that connect us to each other in one complicated way or another.

The lady who sat next to you at that banquet last year could end up being the HR lady who interviews you for your first job. (Too bad you kept chewing with your mouth open and texting all the way through dinner.)

That guy who worked next to you on the line at **Pizza Hut** during college could be the founder of the grain merchandising company where, fifteen years after the mozzarella and pepperoni, you are desperately trying to get in the door. (Aren't you glad you picked up that extra shift for him that night when he had a date with Suzie Smith from across town?)

How about Joe Brown from that committee you worked on for your college council? He could end up being the next Secretary of Agriculture. (Wait, didn't you tell him to shut up during a meeting once? Oops.)

When it comes to networking, that's just it. You never know what connection is going to be your ticket to your professional goals. The links and contacts made on a day to day basis make up a network that could unlock the future for you, or get the door slammed in your face.

It's your job to build a network that is strong, diverse and productive. This doesn't happen overnight, and you can't just hope that you will randomly meet the right people. Most networks are built brick by brick, handshake by handshake. It sounds intimidating, but when you go about it strategically, with an end goal in mind, you are already on your way to building a foundation of personal and pro-

fessional relationships that will link you to future opportunities.

Put Your Best Foot Forward —

Always. No matter where you go, no matter what you are doing, there is always someone watching. Not in a creepy, horror movie kind of way; but they are watching how you act, listening to what you say, and subconsciously filing away the information for a later date. Whether you are volunteering at a county fair, working that minimum wage job at the local feed store, or sitting in the board room of the largest co-op in America, you need to act in a respectful, dignified way that you wouldn't mind your future employer (or your mother) observing. Always treat others how you would like to be treated and you will automatically make a good impression.

Get "Organized." You should never let a chance to network pass you by. Where you work, where you study, where you play, where you eat: look for opportunities to build relationships everywhere. Join a new club or organization; not only will you meet new people, but you will have the opportunity to work with them and show them just how great you are to have around. Monthly meetings, conferences, community service projects and social events provide excellent opportunities to build contacts that last. Organizations such as **Agriculture Future of America (AFA)** even have specific events to help you network with peers and industry professionals.

AFA is a nationally recognized organization for its excellence in



Networking can take place anywhere! Ensuring you are prepared, organized and thoughtful in your networking approach is when you'll get the most of it.

leader training and career development for college men and women and young professionals in the agriculture and food industry. Each November, AFA hosts a leaders conference that provides personal and professional development opportunities. It is a great way to network with 500 students and more than 175 industry professionals who share a passion for agriculture and offer a unique perspective into the industry. For more information about AFA opportunities, visit www.agfuture.org.

Do Your Homework. After you have identified a few networking events that you would like to attend, do some research to find out who is going to be in attendance at each event. Perhaps you can find that information on the company's web site, or by inquiring with the people who are putting on the event. Researching the guest list will give you a better idea of who you want to talk to and what you would like to ask them. This is a great way to avoid awkward conversations about the weather and the food.

Get Carded. It's extremely common to exchange business cards at networking events, so always have some on hand. If you don't currently

have a job, design a creative business card that has just your name, cell number, and an e-mail address that you know you will have for life. (Use an e-mail like *firstname.lastname@username.com*, not an e-mail like *rebel4life@username.com* or *littlefluffykittens@web.com*.)

Keep It Short and Sweet. When you're attending an event where networking is possible, keep the conversation brief or people will lose interest. Have a sixty second nutshell description of yourself and your goals ready to go. (Make it short enough to deliver during an elevator ride!) Your "elevator speech" should tell people everything they need to know about you and open the door for further questions. Keep them intrigued and wanting more without giving them time to get bored or distracted. There is a fine line between not enough and too much so practice, practice, practice!

Did You Hear What I Said? Listen! Keep in mind that your goal, when trying to build a network, is to gain and exchange information. Give others the chance to speak and even boast about themselves. You can solicit the information you want by talking and directing the conversation, but then take the time and effort to truly listen so you remember when it really counts.

If You Can't Say Something Nice ... There is no need to express every last thought in your head. Stay away from badmouthing anyone when in a networking situation. It really is a small world, and you never know how the person you are talking to might be connected.



Look for opportunities to network at events you attend. Oftentimes, networking happens not during the scheduled times of a conference, but rather those times before and after the conference or during breaks.

You're Not Here For The Party. Always remember why you came to the event in the first place: to network. The purpose of a networking event is to help you advance professionally. Yes, it is a social event, but a professional one. You want to be remembered as capable, competent and polished, not as the girl or guy who was passed out on the table in the back or the idiot who was rocking it on the dance floor with only half their clothes on. Be responsible, and above all, never have too much to drink.

Quality, not Quantity. It doesn't matter if you talk to every single person in the room. If you don't have a meaningful, memorable conversation with anyone: you have failed. Not only that, but if you are rushing around the room trying to meet as many people as possible, chances are good you will seem rude as your eyes dart from side to side while scanning the room, identifying the next person to pounce upon. It is important to maintain eye contact with the person you are speaking with, and stay focused on what they are saying. A strong network is based on relationships, not acquaintances.

Take A Note. Once the event is over, you should take all those business cards that you skillfully extracted and write a few notes on the back of each one. Jot down who the person was, what they do, what you talked about and even how they might be able to help you in the future. Once you get home, file them away in a box or folder where you can find them when you need them.

Work on Your Follow Through. If you exchange information with someone, at a networking event or anywhere



Participating in student clubs is one of the best ways to network with fellow peers, but also with industry representatives through company visits, meeting speakers, competitions and tradeshow.

else, and you have the intention of getting together at a later date, be sure to follow up with them. While the conversation and meeting is still fresh in your mind, send a note asking when a good time to get together would be. Try to do this within one week of the event; they are much more likely to remember you that way.

Be a Friend. As you meet new people, or come into contact with clients and associates, ask them how they are doing; take a genuine and sincere interest in their lives. You are more likely to have a lasting relationship with someone if you get past the surface stuff and know them as a friend. At the same time, you should always be yourself; never "pretend" to be their friend. If a friendship is not developing naturally, don't force it.

Stay In Touch. A large part of networking is maintaining the contacts you already have. In the hustle and bustle to get new contacts, don't forget about keeping the contacts you already have up to date with your life. Holiday cards, personal newsletters and social networking sites such as **Facebook** and **LinkedIn** are all excellent ways to keep in touch with friends from long ago.

These are just a few tips to help make your construction of a great network easier. There are hundreds of ways to do it, and even more ways to maintain it; but at the end of the day, networking is still relationship building, and building good relationships takes time. Be patient, put your best foot forward, nurture your network, and eventually, you will "know" one of those people who will help your dreams come true.