

Networking ABCs

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Looking for a job? If you're not sure how to get started — or if you're wondering what you're doing wrong — try these networking tips from career coach Ellis Chase.

In the 1980s, Ellis Chase was in charge of systems staffing for a large bank, filling more than 500 openings per year. “Here’s what I found out: I didn’t like spending money on recruiters and I didn’t like spending money on ads,” Chase told a group of Columbia Business School alumni at a networking seminar at the Columbia Club on October 24. “I wanted to have people handed to me. I was desperate for employee referrals. I’m telling you that most people in most companies would much rather hire through a personal referral.”

Because employers prefer to hire through referrals, the job market is notoriously opaque: most jobs are never advertised. Networking — building relationships with people in fields that interest you — is the best way to tap into this hidden job market.

The first rule of networking, Chase said, is never ask someone for a job. Asking for a job creates a yes/no proposition, and if the answer is no, the conversation is over. “You want to continue conversations,” he said. “You want 50 conversations going on simultaneously. When you ask for a job, you’re pressuring people, and you’re creating scenarios where people are going to have to run away from you.”

Chase emphasized that successful networking requires an indirect approach. “What networking is really all about is making the world aware of your wit, charm and beauty on a very persistent basis through indirect marketing. Direct marketing is: ‘Do you have a job?’ Indirect marketing is: ‘Here’s what I do, here’s what I’m trying to find out, here are the questions I’m interested in asking you.’ Then the other person knows exactly what you’re after, but doesn’t feel pressured to do the yes/no, so they answer the questions. If they have something, or if they know if something, then you’re on their mind.”

Quoting psychologist Bruno Bettelheim — “Maturity is the ability to delay gratification” — Chase said that networking typically does not yield immediate results. “Networking is the ability to build relationships, or rebuild old relationships, over a period of time so that when people hear of appropriate situations for you, you’re on their mind.”

Chase advises job seekers to organize their contacts into three lists:

- A list: people in your targeted field that you know and are comfortable calling
- B list: people in your targeted field that you either don’t know or are not comfortable calling
- C list: everyone you know who can get you to an A- or B-list contact

“A C-list contact is a person once removed,” Chase said, “Your number one source of C-list contacts is the Columbia Business School alumni network. The C-list is your dentist, the person who cuts your hair, your friends, the person who’s sitting next to you tonight. Everybody is a potential source.”

Chase outlined the five steps of the networking process:

1. Phone call
2. Letter
3. Meeting
4. Follow-up
5. More follow-up

The first two steps are interchangeable; you can make the initial contact through either a phone call or a letter. If you are writing to someone that you don’t know, Chase said, a letter sent through snail mail is more likely to get noticed than one sent through e-mail.

Chase walked participants through an imaginary scenario in which they call an old boss that they haven’t spoken to in seven years. The conversation might begin as follows: “I’m just beginning a job search, and I thought you’d be a great person to talk to.” If you’re talking to someone that you know, a decompression statement can help put the person at ease. For example, you might say, “Relax. I’m not going to hit on you for a job. I’m not at that point right now. What I’m really trying to do is intelligently research my options. I want to see exactly what the most intelligent fit is for me at this point.”

If you leave a voice message, Chase said, be sure to tell the person that you will call back. “Don’t leave messages saying, ‘Hi, this is so-and-so, here’s my phone number, could you give me a call.’ Why would a stranger call you? Or why would somebody you haven’t talked to in seven years call you? Or why would anybody call you? This is your work, not theirs. You’re at the absolute bottom of their priority list. But that shouldn’t bother you.”

Chase stressed that networking is the process of building reciprocal relationships. “There’s just as much in it for them as there is for you,” he said. “You’re a source of information because you’re out in the job market, and you may be of help to them at some point.”

While persistent follow-up is crucial to a successful job search, knowing when to back off is equally important. “You’ve got to be able to read, when am I crossing the line of obnoxiousness?” Chase said. “When am I pushing too hard? What are the signals that somebody is sending me that I really shouldn’t keep following up with this person? This is the hardest part of job search.”

Chase told seminar participants to be open to unexpected advice that changes their perspective. Twenty-one years ago, he received a suggestion from a networking contact that changed the course of his career. “She said to me, ‘You seem to be very interested in

X, Y and Z components of your job, yet you're focusing on *this*. Why aren't you thinking about *that*?' I said, 'What's *that*?' And it was a whole field of expertise that I had, but I didn't even know there were consulting firms that did nothing but that in 1985. She threw me something out of left field that changed my life. That's what you want in networking. You want to open yourself up to the left-field comments."