

NETWORKING - Not a Four-Letter Word

by Ellis Chase

The concept we're going to describe here is an indirect marketing approach to job search and information gathering, which we're going to call networking in this article as shorthand. In general, though, while "networking" is fine for us to talk about in the office, or maybe with family members (definitely not those who can help you with building your contact list), it is offputting, sounds exploitative and outdated, and may make the person you're contacting wonder "How can I avoid this person who keeps calling and asking me for job leads?" We need to be a little more subtle. We could refer to "building information" or "researching my market", or any of a number of other accurate euphemisms.

The idea of indirect marketing is a problem for many of those in career transition. There have been thousands of articles, books, and speeches about this subject; many of them will make the already anxious job seeker more anxious. Too much technique. Too much mush. One of the most difficult things for many to accept is that the techniques involved are NOT necessarily linear, are not concrete, and don't always work all by themselves. There is not the certainty of direct results; in fact, networking technique should be utilized in conjunction with all of the other search techniques in order for it to work best.

We're going to try and articulate some of the indirect marketing concepts and techniques here, and hope that job seekers can avoid some of the pitfalls.

The Networking Nightmare

A great way to understand how to successfully network is to understand what can go wrong.

This story is an extreme example.

Several years ago, I was approached by a consultant who was herself a career consultant. She was seeking to develop a relationship with a new consulting firm, where I was managing a local office. She was hoping that there would be possible work in my office.

Her approach was poor on the initial telephone call, because one of the first things she said was “I hear you know a whole lot of people from your activities in our professional association...”. Right away, she was letting me know that she wanted to exploit me. There was no implied quid pro quo, which I think is imperative in all networking activity. There has to be some kind of two-way thinking in networking interactions; what’s in it for the person getting the letter or phone call? This woman was making it clear that this whole interaction was strictly about her.

For some strange reason, I saw her (I really do believe it’s good business to meet people who are approaching you for informational purposes) - and was pleasantly surprised. She had a great sense of humor (always important to me), and had some excellent experience. And, she had a unique skill. Because she was able to deliver group programs in two languages, it immediately occurred to me that she might be of interest to some others in my company who were involved in a current project that might require such a skill. I told her I’d contact them and put her in touch with them. This, of course, is the best kind of networking, the kind you always want to happen –

an immediate and direct result. It doesn't happen much, but when it does, the doors open faster.

I called the project managers, strongly recommending her, and both were interested.

She did not follow up. No letter, no call - not to me, not to them. I had spent time arranging introductions, which meant that I now was in a position myself of owing a favor to the two people I called – and looked foolish.

An interesting postscript to this story is that she called me about six months later, with no acknowledgement of what had happened. She clearly was again not thinking about the “other” person in this networking transaction. She stated that she was now ready to move forward with her plan and wanted to meet the people I had mentioned. As though I had been sitting for all those months waiting for her call. Amazing. This time I did not make myself available to her.

The point to this story is that there must be that quid pro quo in all networking transactions - and a keen sensitivity to the other person, as well. The job seeker has to think: “What would it be like to be sitting in that chair? What would I think if I were being approached by this person?”

Getting Started

It is essential that you have baseline targets defined before you start to network – either for job search or information gathering. These targets don't have to be your ultimate answers. They are starting points. I suggest to most of my clients that they have at least two or three of these baseline targets to start with. Included in a target should be the type of industry, type of job, level of job, geography, culture of organization (if organization at all), lifestyle, and whatever other personal values are important at this beginning point. This defining of baseline targets should be achieved by a prior self-assessment. This is where you'd begin to define interests, values, and initial targets. Don't put pressure on yourself to come to immediate conclusions; keep in mind that this is just the starting point, and that you don't know where it's going to end up – unless you're quite certain at the start that you know what you want.

The self-assessment should continue with research. Where are the organizations? Who are the organizations? What is the history? How do I become an insider, if I'm not one already? What do I need to learn? Would I be a viable candidate? Which of my skills are transferable, and which aren't? Some of these answers can be found in reading professional journals and magazines, as well as other research modes. The rest will be found out through direct interpersonal contact – networking. (An excellent resource for how to build and develop targets is Kate Wendleton's Targeting a Great Career.)

Since, by most accounts and research, getting job offers through networking technique constitutes anywhere from 60-80% of one's total job possibilities, you're going to have to build a substantial contact list. Does this mean you have to be a back-slapping “Yo, let's do lunch” type of person? Do you have to know the movers and shakers right away? Must you be highly

social? Yes, of course it might help if you were pursuing that private equity career and Henry Kravis' nephew was your best friend in elementary school. Or, it would be great if you were the type of person who went out every single night and found it easy to meet people everywhere you went. (I knew an Executive MBA student at Columbia Business School a few years ago who was remarkably adept at this. He could go anywhere – including many local bars - and build new networks; his connections were amazing, and they were all built from his ability to meet new people.) Or, perhaps, your father is CEO of Time Warner.

But most of us are not like those people. (They have a head start, but they don't necessarily have successful job searches based solely on connections...) We might know a couple of people who know a couple of people, and maybe we worked with someone who has all those relationships. Yet, we're still going to have to start somewhere. I suggest an "ABC" contact list.

- **The "A List":** All of the people you know of who are (1) a level or two above where you think you would be – decision makers - in the organization and function where you want to be; (2) peer level, who could be valuable sources of information, and possible access to those in #1; and (3) familiar enough to you so that you can comfortably call.
- **The "B List":** All of the same types of people in the "A List", except you're not necessarily comfortable calling right away. Maybe it's someone you haven't spoken with in years, and feel a bit awkward calling. Maybe it's someone you don't really know that well, and should write to first. Or, perhaps it's someone you don't know at all, and want to write to, because you think they'd be an ideal person from whom you could learn

significant information and perhaps build new networks. Or...maybe it's someone you don't really like... This is the list my clients want to talk with me about the most, because these involve the most difficult and complicated approaches.

- The **“C List”**: Everyone else in your universe who could get you to someone on an “A” or a “B” list. What about the person who cuts your hair? Your accountant? Your extended family? What about my favorite source of networking contacts – alumni associations? Alumni associations are particularly powerful for attorneys, MBA's, and those lucky enough to have attended elite private colleges where there is often a well-connected alumni database, and where membership in that particular “club” means a lot to the members. But you don't have to have attended any of those institutions; many other colleges have established alumni clubs and organizations with well-maintained databases. Professional associations are another favorite “C List” source. Join one (or more) in your target areas. Get on a committee. Two of the best committees are the membership and program committees. Why? On the first, you have access to the membership lists, and on the second, you get to source and possibly meet key professionals in your field. What about political or religious organizations? All are sources of networks. In this last category, I've found over the years that very few groups of any sort can beat Mormons or Orthodox Jews for quick affiliation and building strong networks. I had a couple of clients a few years ago who were Mormons, one living in New York City and one in New Jersey, neither remotely like Salt Lake City. But they were able to build significant networks immediately through their church and extended family and friend affiliations. (One of them landed a terrific job in, of all places, Las

Vegas. I always like to think about the seeming incongruity of a large Mormon population in that city.) I also had an American Orthodox Jewish client who lived in Jerusalem, and he was able to relocate to Cleveland (don't ask), where he had never been and where he had no acquaintances. He was able to build fast networking relationships through a synagogue there, despite not being especially assertive or outgoing.

Here's the good news: All you need is a minimum of five people after you've thought through your ABC's. Most job seekers will have way more than that, but some – maybe a bit introverted, maybe recent arrivals to an area – will only have a small number. Even if you don't connect with three out of those five, you will be able to build the beginning of a successful search based on referrals and information from two of the five. That's just the beginning.

The Three Philosophies

Don't worry. We're not going to discuss Kant or Hegel here (after all, it's just a job search).

But I do believe there are three good ideas to which job seekers should subscribe:

- Don't directly ask people for jobs or leads. If you do your networking well, they'll figure out what you're trying to accomplish. Asking for a job or lead puts your contacts into corners. That's an uncomfortable place, where you're not likely to get what you need from the meeting. When you corner someone, it makes it difficult to get useful information, and what you'll get is someone trying to get out of that uncomfortable position, ending the meeting with you, and probably avoiding future contact as well. You also don't want to place someone in a yes/no situation. The odds of getting a good lead

or knowledge of a good job at that particular moment (a yes) is quite small. We all want that lightning strike, which happens every now and then, but what you want from your contact is something that will lead to referrals, good information, job possibilities, and other leads. This is one area of networking where job seekers make a big mistake, which is to assume that the purpose of the networking meeting is to ask for leads or jobs, to give a resume, and then hope for that lightning.. It rarely happens that way. I've met many clients who are puzzled because they've had 50 or 60 meetings and no real job interviews. When we analyze these interviews, we frequently find that the clients used the "wham bam, thank you ma'am" approach to job search, which is: ask for a job or lead; leave a resume; no further contact. Of course, with no further contact, they'll be forgotten in approximately five minutes. Ten, if they were exceptionally impressive.

- Understand what networking really is: It is building new relationships – or rebuilding old ones – over a period of time so that when the contact hears of something appropriate for you, they'll remember you. (The critical element in this definition is the time part.)
- Bruno Bettelheim, the late psychoanalyst and prolific writer, wrote that "maturity is the ability to delay gratification". I have always thought that was a great way to think about building networks. In other words, there are usually no shortcuts. You need to work the system to get the big payoff – job leads, job interviews, and offers. Successful networking takes time. It's a process, not a quick answer. For people who are anxious, perhaps frantic about finding a new job, this is a very difficult concept to accept.

The Five Steps (plus...)

I think there are five critical steps in building networks, but that depends on how far you can take a new relationship, or one you're rebuilding. I like to call that point the "line of obnoxiousness", a moveable point where you feel you can't go any further with that contact. More about that later. For now, let's say that there are five basic steps, and there could be several more.

Points one and two are interchangeable, depending on your level of comfort with contacting a client (see the "A" and "B" list definitions).

- 1) The letter (or email). This is a matter of personal style. There are those of us who love the telephone, and can call anyone at any time. Since I'm not one of those (I don't even like making dinner reservations), I'll start with the letter. I think that letters are a good way to start the process because they don't blindside the recipient, and can create a context for a follow up call – "This is in regard to some recent correspondence...". In the letter, you – very briefly – introduce yourself, or initially mention the referral source, and state that you're in the process of doing some research about your next job move. I suggest to clients they stay away from any implication that this is about a major change, because that frequently scares people, as though they're not only going to have to explain too much, but that you're not an "insider". You always want to create the impression, even if you're making a radical

change, that you're in some way one of them. The insider.

Next, briefly (there's that word again) explain who you are, and that you're seeking a brief (again!) meeting to discuss industry trends, ask some questions, explore possible new ideas. Suggest that perhaps you might be able to help each other out in the long term.

Here's where we run into a problem. The question I hear from clients all the time – “Why would this person, who is probably very busy, want to talk with me?” One answer, of course, is that sometimes, it's a referral from a colleague of theirs. The other, and more important one, is that smart working people always want to build their own personal networks. The problem with that, of course, is that not everyone out there understands the value of building professional networks. Many think it's a waste of one's precious time. We know better. People who build networks always have ready access for their own future job changes or other professional transactions. One way to protect yourself from occasional rejection is to begin with the assumption that some of the people you try to connect with just don't get it. That's part of the process, and means that it's time to move on to the next person on your list. Understanding that there's quite a bit of rejection in networking – and all aspects of job search – will enable you to maintain a good perspective.

Note: The decision about whether to use email or snail mail is not so easy. I tend to urge the use of real, white paper letters, because they stand out. They're

tactile, and it's not so easy to press the "delete" button. (Ripping and shredding takes more time.) A couple of years ago, I met a recruiter from Microsoft, of all places, at Columbia Business School. She suggested snail mail, which was a bit of a surprise. Her reason? She received way too many emails every day, and they all blurred together for her. One or two pieces of regular mail made more of an impression. Remember, this is Microsoft we're talking about. The exceptions to my recommendation are when you're dealing with technology organizations (except for at least one person at Microsoft) or when you've already established an email connection.

- 2) The phone call. As mentioned above, sometimes people will start with this step. I like the idea of following up the letter or email with a phone call, so that the recipient expects the call. Telephone technique is a big separate topic, but there are some key points worth mentioning here. As The Five O'Clock Club says, it takes an average of eight phone calls to get through to the person you want. That takes a great deal of fortitude, and is certainly one of the hardest aspects of networking. You need to learn some basic sales techniques. A few tips:
- Use bulleted scripts (not word for word), so that very little will throw you off.
 - Build relationships with gate keepers (the ultimate sales technique).
 - Have a short version of your two-minute pitch ready at all times.
 - Stand when you make your calls. It adds weight to your voice.
 - Smile when you call. A smile is actually heard.
 - Try hard not to leave your phone number in the recipient's voicemail, at least the

first few times you call. Say that you'll be "tough to reach", because you'll be in and out of your office the next couple of days, and that you'll call back. That gives you the ability to avoid the wait for a return call, and keep a bit of control over the situation.

- Leave short, direct messages.
- Try to avoid, whenever possible, having your meeting on the phone. A meeting in person creates much more of an impression and memory.
- Don't give up too easily. Successful sales professionals (and you are definitely one of those in this process, like it or not) are relentless.

3) The meeting itself. It's been my experience that networkers put way too much pressure on the meetings, that their expectations are too high. Many expect the meeting to yield instant job openings or leads, which is the exception, rather than the rule. I think there's a better way to look at it, which is to make the networking meeting about specific benchmarks. This also gives you a way to evaluate how useful the meeting actually was.

- **Building or rebuilding relationships** – The overall purpose of building networks is not only to meet people, but to make the relationship last over a period of time. A good approach and a good meeting aren't the end of the process; they're the beginning. Good business relationships, like good customer relationships, are built through a series of contacts. So, the benchmark here is – did you create the groundwork for a continuing relationship? (Sometimes, you also have to ask, "Do

I WANT to continue this relationship? Will it be useful?") Not every person is going to get the same kind of follow up. Don't go into automatic pilot in this process.

- **Information and advice** – this is how you create the structure for your meeting. Assuming that you've introduced yourself initially by giving a two-minute pitch/description of your background, there are two kinds of questions that you should prepare: information questions that reflect that you know what you're talking about, and marketing questions, which is what you really wanted to ask all along.

The information questions might reflect that you've done some research on the contact's organization, or that you've done your own reading on the industry. (Research is a key element of your job search, period.) These questions should reflect that you're at least somewhat of an insider, even though you might be making a radical change. At least, you're coming prepared with questions that show you've made an effort to learn relevant information. What you don't want to do is appear to be a novice, or make the other person do all the work.

The marketing questions are those that help validate your employability in your target areas. One great question to ask is "How did you get to this point in your career?" That will frequently reveal some interesting twists and turns that promise ideas you couldn't have known before. Another good question of this

type is “What do you look for when you hire here?” or “How does my background compare to people that your organization hires?”

If you have five or six of these information and advice questions prepared for each meeting, that should take care of the half hour you’ve requested (don’t ask for more unless offered)). As for the benchmark, useful information will certainly move your search along, and help you refine it as you move on to the next meetings.

- **Names of more people to contact** – obviously, this is what most people think is the ultimate point to networking. It isn’t; it’s just one of several. But, if you do want to add to your contact list, it can be a very important component. The issue with this benchmark is how you pose the question. I suggest two ways. The first, asked at the very end of a meeting, is “Could you suggest anyone I might speak with, the same way we’re talking?” And if there’s an immediate positive response, ask “Would it be easier for you to make the introduction, or would it work better for me to call and use your name?” (Of course, you want the first option, because it not only gives you a stronger referral, but it gives you another excuse to call the referring person and follow up.)

Another technique, one that I find highly effective, is to present a printed list

of perhaps 25 targeted organizations - with theirs listed in there, of course.

Ask the person what they think of the list , not if they know anyone on it – that’s too direct). Almost invariably, ego kicks in, and your contact will have trouble resisting the urge to say immediately, “I know the person who founded that organization, and I know the woman who runs their marketing and advertising...” and then you have some immediate referrals. One of the reasons I know this technique works well is that I always fall for it myself.

- 4) Follow up thank you. As with interviews, the follow up letter/email is almost as important as the meeting itself. It’s not just a courtesy; it’s a marketing statement. In the letter, you will obviously thank someone for the time, but you’ll also recap some of the more interesting points you discussed. This is a positive reinforcement of the meeting, and will help to create the memory (benchmark #1). You might also take the opportunity of adding something that you didn’t get the chance to talk about - “Oh, by the way, I thought you might also be interested to know that I’ve had some experience in...”. And, of course, there’s that quid pro quo statement, adding in to your letter that you’d be glad to repay the favor in any way you can, and that the person should feel free to call on you for that at any time.

- 5) Follow ups (and steps, 6, 7, 8, etc., until the “line of obnoxiousness” gets near). This is where real business relationships happen, and where you will start to hear about opportunities, leads, jobs. It is at this step (and 6, 7, 8, etc.) where job seekers too often drift away. It’s these steps, in addition to the steps outlined above, that create

the relationship and memory which are so critical to this process. Some key types of follow ups beyond the thank you letter:

- Letting your contact know that you've set up a meeting, or have completed a meeting, with someone they referred – and thanking them again, and perhaps adding what was learned or accomplished.
- You've read a great article in your professional field, and want to clip it, and send it with a note to people you've met. The note might read, "Recently saw this, and thought you might be interested. Look forward to staying in touch..."
- A quick email question about somewhere that you've interviewed.
- An update. Here's where you might think you're going near the line of obnoxiousness, so be careful and think through whether the chemistry was good enough to go this far. And stay away from mass mailings. It's like announcing "You're not that special; I'm including you in a large distribution..." (This is also a bad idea when you're letting people know that you've landed a new job.) Definitely not a relationship builder.

When you feel that the relationship has been solid, or that the chemistry is good (i.e., the contact has emailed you back with helpful information or corroboration of a question), you might want to ask a specific job search question or two as well. These are judgment calls, clearly, and you run the risk of stumbling over that line. It's one of the risks in the search. Just like with all other job search rejections or awkward moments, you'll pick yourself up and move on to the next

person.

It's hard work, isn't it? Be sure to keep great records. If you lose control of your record keeping, you'll miss opportunities. If one of your contacts says "I heard that XYZ Company is going to expand their IT function in a couple of months, and I'll be glad to introduce you to a friend of mine there", you'll make a big note of this – and when you do your daily review of all your notes, you won't miss this as the date approaches.

It's hard to ignore the statistical probabilities. Great networking technique will lead to multiple offers. It's like the old New York State lottery ad campaign, "You gotta be in it to win it."