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CAREER COUCH

When Networking Is a Way of Life

By CHERYL DAHLE

Q. It's time to admit it: Your puny electronic Rolodex and stack of stray business cards from people you met at conferences - and no longer remember - isn't cutting it as a networking strategy. How do you go from networking nobody to übernetworker?

A. The best connectors don't confine their networking behavior to a specific event or career turn - during a job search, for example. They network as a way of life. Teresa Rodriguez Williamson, 35, founder of Tango Diva, a company in San Francisco that runs a Web site and sells products for women who travel by themselves, has more than 4,000 people in her personal-contact database. "You never know when you'll meet someone who'll turn out to be an important person in your life," Ms. Williamson said. "Sometimes it happens when you're standing in line at the airport or ordering a drink at the bar. The key is to always be curious and ready to meet fascinating people."

Q. What's a good way to start?

A. Pick a couple of networking groups related to your profession or hobbies and start attending events. You may not click with every group you join, but the odds are that one of them will prove worthwhile, says Rick Frishman, co-author with Jill Lublin of "Networking Magic" (Adams Media, 2004).

Q. How do you meet people at these events?

A. Mr. Frishman recommends that you find the event's organizer and ask to be introduced to a few people. Ms. Williamson prefers to jump right in. Her first attempt at event networking was at a marketing industry gathering in 1993, when she had just moved back to the United States after five years in Australia. She picked the first person she wanted to meet by watching to see who seemed to be attracting the biggest crowd. She marched up to this people magnet, introduced herself and had a great conversation with him. He was Joel Silver, who would one day produce the "Matrix" movies. "I had absolutely nothing to lose," she said. "I dove into networking because I didn't have a choice."

Q. What is a good way to start the conversation?

A. Ms. Williamson often picks something she can compliment, particularly when approaching a woman - nice hair, nice shoes, etc. A self-described "networking maniac," Benjamin Ola Akande, 46, dean of Webster University's School of Business and Technology in St. Louis, says he often asks a question. "People love to share about themselves and their achievements," he said. "I try to create a stage. You know you're doing it right if they're doing most of the talking and you're doing most of the listening."

Q. Shouldn't you pitch yourself, too?

A. No. Ms. Williams and Mr. Akande say networking isn't about promoting yourself; it's about laying the groundwork for a friendship. "You're there to learn as much as possible about them so you can build a relationship," Ms. Williamson said.

Q. What are networking no-nos?

A. If you are in a conversation, don't scan the room for the next person to approach. Don't offer more than you can deliver, or feel comfortable delivering. And don't make requests before you begin to understand a person and forge a connection. Ms. Williamson recalls meeting a banker at an event; shortly after introducing himself, he said he wanted her banking business. "I was so turned off," she said. "I thought: 'You're not even taking the time to get to know me and you want my business? Forget it.' "

Q. How much time should networking take?

A. Ms. Williamson estimates that she spends four hours a week adding people to her database, updating entries and sending e-mail, and that she attends at least one event a week. Mr. Akande sets aside a day twice a year to update and reorganize his database of 5,000 names.

Q. What's involved in the care and feeding of a network?

A. Don't let relationships languish until you need something. That's mooching, not networking. "Eighty percent of networking is following up," Mr. Frishman said.

Ms. Williamson keeps notes in her files about contacts' birthdays, favorite candies or drinks - any tidbit that may be used to deliver a personalized gift or message. She takes along her list of top 20 contacts when she travels, and sends postcards. Mr. Akande writes personal letters to his contacts several times a year, trying to pick holidays like Thanksgiving, when his notes won't be lost in a pile of mail.

Q. Is there such a thing as too much communication with your network?

A. Definitely. "You have to avoid being a pest," Mr. Akande said. "You should communicate when you have something of value to offer, or when you have something genuine to share. Don't just spam out 'hello, how are you' notes."

Q. That seems like a lot of effort. Does it really yield anything?

A. All the time. Mr. Akande recently persuaded the chief executive of [Wal-Mart](#) to speak at his school by tapping a Wal-Mart connection he made years ago. Ms. Williamson forged a promotion partnership between Club Med and her travel company after meeting the director of marketing at a bar in the Caribbean. Mr. Frishman said: "I met my wife through networking. I've hired more than 300 people, most of them through networking."

Q. Do you have to be an extrovert to be a natural networker?

A. No. Even shy people can learn, Mr. Frishman said. "You might be standing in line next to your future husband or the person who will give you your next job," he said. "Call it luck, call it fate, but you can't call it anything if you don't open your mouth and say hello."

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