

Why Your Professional Network Is Not About You

BY MAISIE DEVINE, AUGUST 25, 2014

Top entrepreneurs use three simple rules when building up their network of professional contacts.

Networking--what an overused, self-serving concept! In my experience, the term has been irredeemably misappropriated by those with the social skills of a troglodyte. The expectation is to meet as many people as possible in case you need to use them later. Bad pretense, sad precedent.

There is no question that an extensive professional network is invaluable. It can help you close deals, develop partnerships, and facilitate a career change. But it doesn't happen overnight or without a great deal of effort and personal contribution. As a rule, what you expect to gain, you should expect to contribute at least twofold.

Eight weeks ago, I started in a technology accelerator program to take my business to the next level of capitalization. Right away, I was exposed to an extremely powerful network carefully assembled by prominent entrepreneurs and investors. Many have started and sold companies--some, several times over. Others control hundreds of millions of dollars in top-performing funds. Still more are at the top of their career at Google, Facebook, and Microsoft. But all have one salient characteristic: They develop their network in order to connect people, not for their own personal gain. By using their relationships to bring people together, they forge stronger ties that enable them to maintain their network longer and benefit from the reciprocity.

So if you are set on networking your way to success, you are thinking too linearly. Instead, use these three elementary rules followed by "connectors."

1. Don't "work the room"

When you go to a cocktail party or conference, talk to half the people you normally would. You cannot make a substantive connection in five minutes. Instead, spend at least half an hour per person. Be inquisitive. Take note of what that person is saying and try to learn something new.

2. Pay it forward--offer help

Is he looking for a new salesperson? Maybe she needs an intro to someone at Condé Nast for a big business development initiative in the pipeline. Whatever it may be, think about ways that you can connect each person you meet with a resource in your network that could help that person. People will remember you and go out of their way to repay the proverbial debt.

3. Stay in touch, stay relevant

Following up within 12 hours is a good rule of thumb. It solidifies the relationship and fosters further communication. Then every three or four months, send a quick update email or article that could be useful. Go out of your way to be a connection that person can rely on.

<http://www.inc.com/maisie-devine/why-your-professional-network-is-not-about-you.html>