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I'm at a Networking Event--Now What?

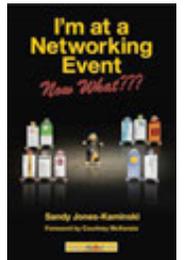
Networking should be like the holiday season--more about giving than receiving.

By: Sandy Jones Kaminski | 04/15/2010

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This is an excerpt from I'm at a Networking Event--Now What? by Sandy Jones Kaminski.

Quite a few years ago, I recognized that there had to be a better way to make and cultivate quality connections, so I rather unwittingly started taking the "paying it forward" approach to networking. I will attempt to share my knowledge here. What's the pay-it-forward approach? Well, thanks to that movie with the kid from "Sixth Sense" in it, a lot of us understand that the expression "pay it forward" is used to describe the concept of asking that a good deed be repaid by having it done to others instead. What this basically means is that you try to be attentive, wherever you are, for opportunities to help someone else. What a novel idea, huh?



Perhaps you have an older co-worker who is too proud to ask for help with the shared login for the company Twitter account, or maybe you're at your company's open house event and see someone who looks like they could really use some insider introductions, hovering just past the entrance to the party. Well, the belief is that by helping either of these folks, you can quite possibly change people's attitudes about at least a little part of their world through your unobtrusive acts of kindness.

My favorite part of all this, and what I attempted to demonstrate at the Pay It Forward Parties I've hosted, is that when people thank you and want to "repay" you (that is, pay it "back"), let them know that what you'd really like is for them to pay it "forward"--you'd like them to do something nice for a few other people they don't know (my guests at my PIF Parties, for example), and ask those people to do something nice for a few more people. The idea is to make a conscious effort to increase the goodness of your corner of the world, and networking situations are the ideal environments in which to give it a go.

The Debate Is Over

There's little debate today that most of us should always be networking, and the truth is most of us actually are. We do it all the time--whether it's at a professional association's luncheon event, at a friend's wedding, at a church gathering, the senior center where we volunteer once a month or the sidelines of a soccer field. Don't even get me started on how many people make new key contacts at their kids' sports event. (I admit it does make me think hard about adopting sometimes!) People can network or connect with others in a long line at the post office or even at the coffee shop you go to every workday. The question is: Are you making the most of your time and the opportunities available to you each and every day?

Action: Over the course of the next week, take note of how many new people you encounter. And yes, seat mates on the bus count!

What Should You Not Do At a Networking Event?

You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you.

- Dale Carnegie

Don't be a business card commando. If you are a compulsive business card collector, please stop it. Handing out your business card to 50 people you talked to for about 30 seconds each not only makes you look self-serving and desperate, it also sends off a clear message that you're most likely going to spam people with your newsletter, resume or webinar invites. This means you and your communications are likely to be considered spam and sent to a place that will get you blacklisted in more ways than one. There was a guy in Chicago who did this at practically every event in town and was on so many blacklists that I'd been warned about him repeatedly weeks before I had even encountered him.

What do you do when you encounter someone like this? If he shoves his card at you, go ahead and accept it so that you'll know to keep an eye out for him in the future, but don't feel like you need to give him a card in return. Just smile and say thank you, but if he asks for a card, and you don't want to give him one because you know nothing about him or how you might be able to collaborate with him, just say, "I'm sorry, but I'm almost out and I have another event to go to"--which at some point you will--so smile and move on.

Don't be a hit-and-run. Make an effort to stay in touch or in occasional contact with folks you meet with whom you want to stay connected. Make notes on the back of the business cards they've given you about what they need help with or what their interests are. Then try to continue to pay attention to things that matter to them. This is the way to create quality connections and trusted new contacts.

For example, after you have followed up with a new acquaintance and are now perhaps linked on LinkedIn, when you notice updates or changes in her status, go ahead and message or e-mail her to comment on the change. It might be congratulations if you notice a new job, name change (perhaps she got married) or maybe a promotion. Or, if you know she's looking for a new opportunity or hinted that she would be soon, it might be to offer a suggestion about a good job board you spotted in her field or to connect her to someone new you have met. And, if you see that a contact is traveling or moving to a new town, offer to connect her to whomever you may have a quality connection with there.

Also, be sure to reach out to people when you don't need anything. Networking is about creating, nurturing and building relationships, and they need care and feeding. The whole idea is about not waiting until you need something to build a network; it's about continually cultivating and engaging in that network. The wider your network, the more people you know whom you've worked with. This also implies that all these people know the kind of person you are and the work you do.

Action: Notice or learn something new about three of your current contacts this week. Look at their personal or company website or online activities to see what they're up to and, if you can offer encouragement or support or a congrats, do so. Be sincere though; don't just go through the motions!

Don't waste your time. Remember, have a goal or goals so you don't waste your precious time and energy. Don't go to a networking event unprepared. Try to research the types of people who will be there, and the format of the event. Also, focus on making connections of quality, not quantity. It's also just as important to disconnect from the unproductive or overly opportunistic and one-sided networking relationships you'll unfortunately come across. And, for the latter, often just by association, you could attract more unwelcome attention or unwanted perceptions.

Don't spend any more time on connections you make when you recognize that there's a suspicious or questionable agenda, or they simply aren't reciprocating or paying it forward. Just move on and, whatever you do, don't take it personally. Today's economy has many people coming from a slightly desperate position, and it's best to just forgive their tactics and practice empathy when you can, but you also don't need to let others take advantage of you. Trust your gut and move on.

Like most folks I know, I'd much rather have someone who's not interested in building a quality connection with me come right out and tell me she wants to meet my brother-in-law (BIL), the head of engineering at Motorola. It's much better than having her stalk my Connections list on LinkedIn, and then try to reach him by dropping my name during a cold call or e-mail. My BIL, of course, tells me about it, and then I have that person's eyebrow-raising methods reflected on me ("Nice friends, Sandy," he says). Not to mention that they will now likely have my bad mojo out there on them.

Please don't misunderstand. I recommend being an "open networker," in that you are open to helping people get what they are looking for; they just need to tell you what it is first and at least offer a two-way street if they can. I say be happy to connect with people if they manage to build a relationship through the getting-to-know-you process. Just don't let people "leverage" your contacts without your permission or take advantage of your generosity by trying to get for free what you actually charge others for.

Action: Identify someone who is better than you at networking, and attend an event with him or her. And if you really want a good mentor (to your wingman), offer to pay his or her way to the event. Then watch the way he or she works the room, and his or her approach. You will learn a lot by watching and listening, and you won't be any different than the other 80 percent of people in the room, who aren't totally confident in their networking skills, either.

Sandy Jones-Kaminski has more than a decade of experience in business development, affiliate marketing/management, sales channel creation and partner/client relations. In 2002, Sandy launched her own partnership marketing and business development strategy consulting practice, [Bella Domain LLC](#). She is also author of the book, [I'm at a Networking Event--Now What?](#)

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