



Business Basics

How To Network Your Way Up The Corporate Ladder

Tara Weiss, 07.10.08, 12:00 PM ET

Ivan Misner was at a church function recently and spotted a local business leader he wanted to meet. During the ensuing casual chat about their jobs, the businessman mentioned that he was having trouble finding a way to create a foundation to do charity work. Misner recommended a local organization, even offering a contact there who could help. The businessman gave Misner his card and told him to keep in touch.

"If I can help other people, I can build a relationship and then a network," says Misner, author of the forthcoming book *The 29% Solution: 52 Weekly Networking Success Strategies*.

Misner is a pro when it comes to networking, but there's no reason you can't be just as good at it. When you've landed your first job and are busy learning the ropes, that's no time to put your network building on the back burner. The minute you get your first paycheck is when you should start thinking about building up your contacts, because getting ahead in your career is directly tied to whom you know.

In Depth: How To Network Your Way Up

"Your network is the most powerful resource you can have, and it's free," says Jan Vermeiren, author of *Let's Connect!: A Practical Guide for Highly Effective Professional Networking* and founder of the [Networking Coach Web site](#). "People from your network can connect you with the people you need to reach your goals."

Building a network, though, is a skill. Handing someone your business card at a cocktail party and asking him or her to look at your résumé is not networking. Cultivating a relationship over time, however, is.

"Networking is like gardening; don't expect instant results," says Janet White, author of *Secrets of the Hidden Job Market*.

Successful networkers make themselves visible--they put themselves out there. And they back up that ubiquity with credibility.

The first step toward gaining that credibility is by joining your industry's professional or trade organization. That's where you'll meet your peers from around the country. Once you're on the inside, ask senior-level co-workers what organizations they belong to and join those as well. But it's not enough to pay your dues and attend the monthly meetings. Get involved by joining one of the committees or run for a board position.

If that's not quite your speed, consider volunteering to do a presentation on your area of expertise at the group's annual conference, or perhaps write for the group's publication. From that point, meeting a wide range of people will be a breeze, since your peers will come to you to ask for advice.

Keep in mind, however, that the people in your network are not necessarily the ones who will ultimately help you land a job. The trick is to find out who they know by asking the simple, obvious question: "Who do you think I should be talking to?"

Once you make contact with that particular person, it's important to have a short, snappy description of your job when you're asked, invariably, what it is that you do. Think about it and refine it, since it's your main hook that will get a potential employer interested in asking you more questions. When people ask Misner, author of several books on networking, what he does for a living, he has a unique response.

"I tell them that I help people create referrals for life," he says. "Their next question is, 'What's that?'"

Don't forget to return the favor. Helping other people meet professional contacts builds your credibility. Plus, they're more inclined to introduce you around too.

Also remember to **network with your co-workers**, especially the ones who started their careers around the same time you began yours. Those people are as likely to become future decision makers as you are, so stay in touch with them after you leave your current job. Just a simple e-mail every few months asking how things are going will suffice.

"Those people can be your ambassadors to other people," says Vermeiren. **"The real power in the network is in the second degree--not your people, but the people they know."**

Get to know colleagues across departments too. Most professionals deal with a range of people they never actually meet because they communicate via phone or e-mail. Instead of maintaining that phone/Internet relationship, invite them out to lunch. You never know when having a support network in another department might come in handy.

Using Web sites like **LinkedIn** is useful, but the best way to network is to do it in person. Says Misner, "Until we're living in a *Star Wars* world where we have meetings in a holographic circle, meeting face to face is still the most powerful way to do it."

