



Ivan Misner: Networking

Debunking the Six Degrees of Separation

Do you believe that anyone in the world is only six people removed? Here's why that theory's wrong and what it means for networking.

By Ivan Misner | April 30, 2007

URL: <http://www.entrepreneur.com/marketing/marketingideas/networkingcolumnistivanmisner/article177986.html>

What do Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and Six Degrees of Separation have in common? People around the world believe in them. Since I don't want to do an exposé on Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, I'm going to tackle the six degrees of separation theory instead. This is the widely held belief that any person is connected to any other person through no more than six intermediary connections.

I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, but it just isn't true. The myth stems from several "small world experiments" conducted by Stanley Milgram in the 1960s and '70s that involved sending folders or letters from a group of people in one part of the country to a specific person they didn't know in another part of the country. The people were told to get the material to someone who might know someone that would know the individual.

It was, in fact, found that the letters or folders took, on average, between five and six connections to reach the intended recipient. Though the average number of links was five or six, the majority of the connections ranged from two to 10 links. What's more, the overwhelming majority of people in Milgram's studies never got the material to the intended recipient. His most successful study only yielded a 29 percent completion rate. In one study, the number was only 5 percent.

So we aren't "all" connected to everyone else by six degrees of separation. But why would I, who has devoted most of his professional career to business networking, be telling everyone about the inaccuracy of this iconic concept upon which a lot of networking pros hang their hats?

There are two reasons. First, I believe this myth creates complacency. The notion gives some people a false sense of expectation that connections are bound to happen sooner or later, no matter what they do. If this were the case, you wouldn't need a networking columnist, would you?

Secondly, and most importantly, the studies' findings clearly indicate that some people are better connected than others. This means networking is a skill that can be developed. With reading, training and coaching, people can improve their networking skills, increase their connections and become part of the roughly 29 percent of people that are, in fact, separated from the rest of the world by only six degrees.

Milgram's work was revolutionary. It opened up a new world of discussion and understanding. It has, however, been romanticized. The mythical version of his findings doesn't serve anyone well. It gives people a false sense of security and an erroneous understanding of the networking process.

The good news is that it's possible to be a successful networker. By understanding that you can be connected to anyone through the power and potential of networking, you can set yourself apart from the competition. Just remember that being able to make connections isn't an entitlement.

