

# There's More to Networking than Achieving Personal Gain

**Bad Networking vs. Good Networking**

*By Barbara Moses*

Have you met many good networkers lately? Me neither.

These days, networking is recognized as a life-management skill, but only a small percentage of professionals and managers are at ease with it, and even fewer could be described as skilled. Many are awkward or obnoxious when attempting to make connections. This discomfort and clumsiness comes partly from not understanding basic networking mechanics. They ask, "What am I supposed to do? Accost everyone I meet and say: 'Hi. My name is . . . and I'm a customer-service-driven, team-building marketing professional specializing in the hospitality sector'?" Others are uncomfortable because they feel that networking means "using" people or being insincere. At times, they are. "I'm so sick of people who call to network only when they're worried about their job," says a director of training. "Or who insist they want to discuss something of mutual benefit when I know there's nothing in it for me and that they only want to get work from me."

## What's Your View of Networking?

What does networking mean to you? Do you have a picture of wooden-looking professionals in suits rushing to pass out business cards and impress higher-ups? In fact, most people who receive cards in this way don't ever look at them again. Admittedly, meeting and delivering a personal spiel to top decision-makers is one aspect of networking, but most good networkers do this infrequently. Indeed, they're status-blind and network comfortably at all levels. Another typical networking scenario is meeting as many people as possible and asking them for information about their field, the names of others or for additional assistance. But notice how this activity is a one-way street. Most great networkers I know spend far more time helping others than seeking personal benefit. As one consultant and extraordinary networker once told me, "I've been very blessed in my work. So it's up to me to give freely and as much as I can."

## Bad Networking

People who receive frequent networking requests agree on typical no-nos and irritants. Do you see yourself in any of the following networking types?

- 1) The socially tone deaf:** After meeting you at a party, this person sticks to you like glue for the entire evening, picking your brain about your business and contacts or endlessly describing his or her services and how they can benefit you. These incessant networkers can't imagine meeting anyone, anywhere, without pitching them.
- 2) The ingrate:** This person takes hours of your time and never sends a thank-you note. Later, you hear that one of your suggestions helped him or her land a job.
- 3) The infomercial actor:** This may be the most egregious networking type. After calling to ask for help, they provide a blow-by-blow description of their accomplishments over the past 30 years. Just when you think a lobotomy would be preferable to listening any longer, you're asked a question. But as you start to respond, they interrupt with, "and one more thing I did that was hugely successful...."
- 4) The robot:** This unimaginative type has rehearsed for hours, knows the drill and sticks to the script ("I'm a proven leader in...."). They ask exactly 25 questions and ask for exactly 10 names of possible leads.

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**5) The social climber:** They confuse a contact's level with his or her capacity to be helpful, so they want to meet only senior people. However, unless such job hunters are seeking high-level work, CEOs and other top executives are typically too far removed from the hiring process to be helpful. It's unlikely they would make a direct recommendation to hire the networker. At most, some doors might open, but that might cause resentment among managers forced to meet with the networker. In short, the whole strategy is likely to backfire.

**6) The card collector:** At a recent networking party I hosted for female colleagues, friends, and clients, everyone told stories and laughed except for an executive recruiter who was too busy handing out and collecting cards to enjoy herself. While leaving, she commented, "This was fabulous. Look how many cards I have." We thought she missed the point. Needless to say, few of the party-goers returned her follow-up call.

**7) The fair-weather friend:** These people call only when they need something from you. Otherwise you might as well be dead.

## Good Networking

Good networkers are "wired" into a broad matrix that extends their connections beyond their immediate professional boundaries. They cultivate relationships with people who know how to get things done. Like good mentors, they are genuinely curious about people and what they think. They also enjoy bringing together interesting people and ideas, and they are as proud of making things happen for others as they are of how many people are listed in their personal organizers.

Skilled networkers don't view staying connected with others as networking. Instead, they see their interactions as exchanging information: They learn something from and pass on something to the other person. The best networkers rarely expect a personal payoff. Many, in fact, are only "paying forward" to someone else in need instead of paying back the person who originally helped. In short, they've benefited from their contacts' kindness and help, so they seek opportunities to be generous to others and hope they'll do the same.

In good networking, there's always a mutual connection. Done well, networking is like graceful dancing. Both parties are stimulated by the interaction. No one feels used. At its best, the interaction produces a deeply satisfying emotional and intellectual connection. Done poorly, it's exceptionally off-putting.

Networking is as much a cognitive skill as an interpersonal one. Adept networkers are huge information synthesizers who can see connections that aren't obvious between people, things and ideas. From the initial presenting issue, they can identify a higher idea the other person might not have seen and make creative referrals. In other words, they're idea generators.

Don't wait to network until you attend your next so-called networking event. Instead, seek opportunities everywhere and think about them altruistically. To borrow a phrase, "*ask not what your network can do for you, but what you can do for it.*"

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• Dr. Moses is author of "What Next? The Complete Guide to Taking Control of Your Working Life," from which this article has been excerpted (DK Publishing Inc., 2003). She is the president of BBM Human Resource Consultants Inc., an international career-management consulting firm headquartered in Toronto. [www.careerjournal.com/columnists/careeredge/20040503-moses.html](http://www.careerjournal.com/columnists/careeredge/20040503-moses.html)

• Posted by Steven Burda. Open Networker [www.linkedin.com/in/burda](http://www.linkedin.com/in/burda) Invitation Email: [burda.mba@gmail.com](mailto:burda.mba@gmail.com)