

## Establishing Social Networks

By BNET Editorial

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As long as there have been people on the planet, there have been social networks. They emerged for many reasons, from creating “safety in numbers” to establishing a tribal identity. At a basic level, they enable people to more efficiently harvest and kill food, defend their identity and territory, and engage in activities that bring joy to life. Also, they allow people to pass memories, learning, and wisdom to new generations to perpetuate survival patterns.

Generation X, which typically includes people born between the early sixties and late seventies, is probably the last generation to experience “old-fashioned” social networks. These were often characterized by relatively stable family units, low mobility, and a kind of constancy that is absent from most of our social networks today.

Generation Y on the other hand, the twenty-somethings, have been raised in a completely different social atmosphere, driven by a high level of technological and material sophistication, instant communication, and global networks. This is both the backdrop for social networking and also the launch pad for more imaginative “virtual” engagement.

### What You Need to Know

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#### **Isn't social networking just a way of getting your own way by using other people's knowledge, skill, and talents?**

If you constantly use someone for personal gain, they will soon get tired of serving you and draw their boundaries more tightly around them. Of course, you may get something from them in the short term, but you are also likely to get some long term resentment. There may come a time when you really need this person to help you so make sure that the advantages of your relationship are evenly balanced.

#### **I'm really shy and don't like networking at all. How can I overcome this?**

Many people find social networking a strain because they are not naturally confident or extroverted. However, if you think of it as a task rather than expecting it to be a pleasure, you may find it less daunting, particularly if you know why you're doing it. Go into the social network with a clear objective and a plan that includes some contingencies in case things do not work out the way you want them to.

## **I am moving to a new location with my work and don't know anyone in the area. How can I create a network out of nowhere?**

If you are moving with your work, you already have the makings of a social network, but if this is not appealing to you, seek out clubs and societies and attend a few events to get yourself going. You may not decide to continue with these, but the chances are that you will meet a few people who will give you access to their social network.

## **My network doesn't seem to be delivering what I want. How can I breathe life back into the relationships that I have?**

If your network is not giving you what you want, ask yourself if you are giving it what it wants. You may, however, find that you have outgrown your network and that it is time to move on. Sometimes we are hindered by people who remain stuck in one place, and then the relationships start to go sour. Be clear about what you want from your network and do not be afraid to move on if it is time to do so.

## **What to Do**

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In the last few years, social networks have migrated from the relative confines of family units and close circles of friends to virtual worldwide communities. Yet they all serve as mechanisms to enable us to connect with each other and bring value and meaning to our lives. Friends Reunited was probably the first virtual social network that used the Internet as its platform. Launched in 2000, it grew rapidly to put people back in touch with each other or to repair broken social networks. This spawned the beginning of many virtual networks in which people could find each other and communicate across the globe, across cultures, across age groups, across creeds, and across different levels of social, educational, and physical advantage.

MySpace ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)) came onto the virtual scene in 2004 and was so successful that it was acquired two years later for a phenomenal \$580 million. It uses chat rooms, e-mails, and blogs to enable friends and families to talk online, orchestrate meetings with new people, and find those who have left our orbit temporarily.

We also have Second Life ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)) which is a 3-D, virtual world entirely built and owned by its residents who take on a persona (Avatar) of their choice. Avatars take social networking to new heights because instead of reflections of "real" people, they are manifestations of people's fantasies. Since its launch in 2003, Second Life has grown dramatically and today it is inhabited by over five million characters.

Even after having taken social networking into the stratosphere, the principles that underpin real or virtual social networking remain the same.

## **Make Sure Your Relationships are Reciprocal**

This is the “do as you would be done by” principle. People are much more likely to be open and willing to assist you if they feel that their efforts will be rewarded in equal measure. Think of what you could do for someone to show your willingness to enter a reciprocal relationship and look for opportunities to respond to someone’s interest or need. Try not to invest in a particular outcome but give unconditionally. If you approach this as a business transaction, you may find yourself being disappointed, but if you give freely, you may be surprised and delighted by what comes back to you.

Do not forget that you can ask for what you want. You need not rely on maneuvering someone into a position where they are compelled to meet your needs. Often, people like to be given the means to assist and are pleased to do so.

## **Show Respect for Others’ Views**

Social networking should not be undertaken selfishly or cynically. You may have to acknowledge that people have a different perspective on life and that your way is not their way. This does not mean that you cannot enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship. Try not to be judging or dismissive of someone else’s values and beliefs but see things from that person’s point of view. This means not making assumptions, not jumping to conclusions, and not making hasty judgments. Listen attentively to what someone has to say and be open to the possibility of changing your mindset.

## **Be Reliable**

When you say you will do something for someone, make sure that you honor your promise and deliver. Social networks are voluntary, not compulsory, so it is easy to waive a commitment because there are unlikely to be any negative professional repercussions. However, if you build a reputation for overpromising and not delivering, you will soon find that you will not be taken seriously, and others’ willingness to help you will diminish.

## **Stay in Touch**

Networks are sustained through effective relationships. These can only flourish if they are characterized by good communication. This means staying in touch and attending to the quality of

your personal exchange. Demonstrate that you have someone's interests at heart by sending him or her an article, a congratulatory note, or an invitation to an event or dinner. It is very easy to stay in touch using communication technology such as e-mails and text messages. This enables you to achieve a "light touch" while reminding someone that you are still around.

## **Create a Good First Impression**

Remember, it takes only a few seconds for people to make up their minds about you, and having done so, it is very difficult to change their perceptions. You may want to think about the first impressions you create and whether these are helping or hindering you. Perhaps you could ask a trusted friend to give you some feedback.

## **Keep Good Records**

If you have a poor memory, you might find it useful to devise a system that will prompt you when important occasions are coming up for people in your social network. There are many paper and electronic tools available to make sure you remain informed of what is happening on your social landscape. By being thoughtful and proactive about your communication, you will be able to demonstrate that you care and that you are willing to put yourself out for the relationship. This means listening for and taking a note of important dates or events when they come up in conversation. If you can discipline yourself to do this as soon as you finish your interaction, you will find that you have a store of trigger points for further communication.

## **Be Clear about Your Goals**

There is always a desired outcome to social networking, whether this is tangible or a "warm feeling of inclusion." Be clear about what you want from your networking activities so that you can judge whether or not your efforts are being well spent.

## **Regularly Reevaluate Your Relationships**

If you find that you have a contact that is absorbing too much of your time and is not giving you what you want, do not continue to pour your energy into the relationship. Sometimes we have to prune our networks in order to keep them manageable. Equally, there will be times when you need to build your social network. You can do this by attending events, hosting functions, or volunteering your services. Our networks are bound to ebb and flow according to changes in our lives or circumstances. We may

lose some people from our social network and gain others. We may reconnect with past relationships years down the line. Social networks are dynamic structures that require our attention if we are to get the best from them.

The most important thing is to leave people feeling valued. This means entering relationships sincerely and being honest about your motivations.

## What to Avoid

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### **You Fail to Manage Others' Expectations**

Sometimes networks get too big and it becomes impossible to maintain all the relationships at once. Rather than risking people feeling ignored or let down, think about how you can manage their expectations. You might disclose that you are going through a particularly intense or busy time and that you will not be available as much for a while. Let people know what is going on so that you can go back to them when time or circumstance allows.

### **You Cannot Say “No”**

Not being able to say “no” and taking on too much for other people can result in a burdensome load and too much stress. You don't *have* to agree to everything people ask of you. Practice assertive communication and manage your boundaries so that you don't get overwhelmed.

### **You Get Disheartened**

People sometimes get disheartened if someone in their network declines a request or is unable to help them achieve something they desired. Although this feels a bit like a dead end, ask them who they would recommend you approach next. They may make a recommendation that takes you out of your network, but it will give you the opportunity to build new relationships.

### **You Demand Too Much**

Being overdemanding when you have a need can exhaust the good will in your social network. Be vigilant about giving back to the people that have helped you. If you have developed your

relationships well, you will be able to position your reciprocal gesture precisely and effectively, leaving people feeling valued and your relationships in tact.

## Where to Learn More

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### Books:

Timperley, John Network Your Way to Success: Discover the Secrets of the World's Top Connectors. Piatkus Books, 2003.

Fisher, Donna, and Sandy Vilas, Power Networking: 59 Secrets for Personal and Professional Success, 2nd ed. Bard Press, 2000.

Parks, Malcolm R., Personal Relationships and Personal Networks. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Incorporated, 2006.

Cope, Mick, Personal Networking: How to Make Your Connections Count. Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2003.

RoAne, Susan, How to Work a Room: The Ultimate Guide to Savvy Socializing In-Person and On-Line, Rev. ed. HarperCollins Publishers, 2000.

Darling, Diane, The Networking Survival Guide: Get the Success You Want by Tapping into the People You Know. McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2003.

### Web Sites:

Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org>

The Social Networking weblog: [www.socialnetworking-weblog.com](http://www.socialnetworking-weblog.com)

facebook: [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

Linked In: [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)

myspace: [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)

Networking Knowledge: [www.networking-knowledge.com/basics.html](http://www.networking-knowledge.com/basics.html)

SalesLobby.com: [www.saleslobby.com/Mag/0502/FEAN.asp](http://www.saleslobby.com/Mag/0502/FEAN.asp)