

Using Your Network to Market Your Personal “Brand”

By BNET Editorial

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Relationships form the foundation of business. Building strong and meaningful business relationships paves a pathway to success in the long term. Consider the following questions as you prepare to network and market yourself:

- What personal or professional goals are you striving to reach when networking?
- Which of your strengths are the right ones to market?
- What organizations or events are likely to be valuable networking venues?
- How much time do you have to devote to networking, and when can you fit it in?
- What benchmarks will you use to gauge your success?

What You Need to Know

What is the value of marketing myself?

Research shows that people who are successful in their careers tend to spend more time networking. They have a large, varied, and active network of contacts and are involved in professional and community activities outside their business. The successful ones never stop looking for opportunities to be more visible.

How is networking different from politicking? I don't want to look bad.

Networking is done for the good of your business, rather than for personal gain. Successful networkers draw people to them because of their connections and resources.

When should I network?

Any gathering can be an opportunity for networking. You should always be looking for chances to network. As you build professional relationships, always ask yourself: “What do I have to give this person?” “How can I help that person?” Networking is a give-and-take process. The more you do

for others, the more they'll want to do for you. This will build on itself as time goes on, helping you develop your own network of contacts.

What to Do

Clarify Your Personal Objectives

The reasons for networking and marketing yourself are not limited to a handful, and they may change in the course of your career. For example, when starting up or trying to grow a small business, one's may include seeking support for a major project, finding funding, or forming partnerships with local businesses. When seeking a new job or promotion, networking can help you find the right person to give you expert guidance. Building a network of relationships is important any time, but it is much more effective to have an objective when building these relationships. Knowing what you want to accomplish will make you more efficient in prioritizing your networking activities

Itemize Your Strengths

Knowing your strengths and how to market them is key in any career. It will be helpful to you when you set out to market yourself to write down a list of your skills and abilities, what special knowledge you have, what experiences you have had that define you, and what traits and beliefs make up your character. Post copies of your list wherever you might see them frequently: the refrigerator, the dashboard of your car, your wallet. Keep your strengths at the forefront of your mind so that you always remember that your contacts will value what you have to offer.

Network from a position of strength, never weakness. In other words, have something of value to offer your contacts. You do not want to be seen as an annoyance. As far as possible, start your networking campaign *before* you have to ask others for help: people will be more willing to help you out if they know you. Join or create a network to build relationships, and do what you can to help others or the organization. Helping others, even when you do not have a clear objective in mind, is like putting money in the bank, which you will be able to withdraw down the line when you are in need of help.

Identify Organizations and Events for Networking

To create a list of organizations and events where you will be able to meet contacts, start by talking to your coworkers. Read trade journals and visit related web sites. Keep your eyes open for special interest groups that you can join, like those for "entrepreneurial women" or "startup owners." Join in. Consider not only joining organizations but volunteering for them. When you are at professional

events, look for ways to meet and talk to people, such as attending social functions, or joining people for dinner.

Form a List of Contacts

Creating and maintaining a contact list is an essential tool in marketing yourself throughout your career. When you have identified your objectives in marketing yourself, brainstorm all the people you know who might help you, keeping your objectives in mind. Then prioritize the list in order of who might be most helpful to you. Include those who have helped you in the past but may not be of direct help to you now. Ask these people who else they might know who could help you.

Develop an Action Plan and Schedule

Now that you have a list of organizations and events, combined with your contact list, you can formulate a plan of action. Set up a schedule for making a certain number of calls per day or week to the people on your contact list. Fill your calendar with the networking events you have identified. Spend your time at these conferences, organization meetings, and other networking events making new connections.

Get Out There

Spend as much of your time as you can manage attending events and meeting people. Beforehand, take another look at your list of strengths. At the event itself, focus on your objectives in marketing yourself. Visualizing a successful outcome can help bring about that very result. Strive for a friendly and professional demeanor but do not forget to be yourself. Connect with people on a personal level first, before asking for help. When you have a meeting with a person from your contact list, bring a gift. This will help them remember you and it will demonstrate your appreciation for their time and expertise.

Put the Internet to Good Use

You can use the Internet to make connections too, as well as to learn valuable information from colleagues. The Internet removes distances between people and opens up a world of contacts you would not otherwise find. Use one of the online search engines to find newsgroups or bulletin boards for your field or topic.

Market Your “Brand”

In marketing a product, marketers look for the “Unique Selling Proposition” (USP), some feature of the product or service that is unique and relevant. If you think of yourself as a “brand,” you need to define who your “customers” are and what your Unique Selling Proposition is. Review your list of strengths and create a slogan for yourself, a short phrase that spells out your USP, like “My negotiation skills resolve conflicts” or “I solve problems through teamwork.”

Once you have created your USP, brainstorm ways that you can market your unique qualities. You want to create desire in your customers for “Brand You.” You can do this by communicating what you have to offer, for example by writing an article in a newsletter or volunteering to give a talk. Make sure your “brand” has visibility.

Track Your Progress

In order to keep track of your progress, keep a notebook. Use it to record your action plan, but also set short term goals, or benchmarks, that you can check off as you accomplish them. For example, if you have a goal of a certain number of contact calls per week, you can mark that off when completed. When we make ourselves accountable for our actions, we are more likely to follow through. Using a friend, partner, or professional coach—another person you can be accountable to—as a sounding board can contribute to this. It also helps to have someone who will celebrate your successes and accomplishments with you.

Always Say “Thank You”

In the process of networking, you will count on many people to assist you by offering information, opportunities, or valuable contacts. Use your notebook to keep track of who has done what for you. Write each person who has helped you a thank you note. People appreciate being appreciated, and will be more likely to help you again.

Stick to It

Expect to use your networking and marketing skills throughout your career. They are long-term skills that will serve you well over time, but may not bear fruit right away. Don’t give up and remember that at first you should expect more than you get. If you stick to the basic principles throughout your career, however, your network will become one of your most valued assets.

What to Avoid

You Worry About Being a Bother

Many people enjoy helping others. You may run across a few who do not. But it never hurts to ask, especially if you use the right methods. Be prepared, be professional, and keep your word. Do not take up too much of anyone's time. Be specific when asking to meet with someone. Say, "I'd like 30 minutes of your time," and then stick to it. Whenever you meet with someone, think of what you can do to help that person. Try to create situations where both you and the other person come out ahead.

You Try to Force It

Forcing your "brand" on someone who is not interested is not what networking is all about.. Successful networking is a give and take process that takes into account the needs of both parties. Your modus operandi should be to develop long-term relationships. Remember to focus on building relationships, not on immediate results.

You Don't Try Hard Enough

If you find yourself in networking situations without ever bringing up your own needs or interests, you need to reevaluate your networking methods and goals. Perhaps you are not clear in your mind about why you are networking, or you don't feel strongly enough about it. Turn back to step one and clarify your purpose.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Darling, Diane. *The Networking Survival Guide: Get the Success You Want By Tapping Into the People You Know*. McGraw-Hill, 2007.