
Networking as a Contribution

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The real mission

It's been refreshing to see the field of sales evolve beyond the pushy stereotype of "yes at any cost" to today's intelligent vendor-client relationships that thrive long-term. It seems to me that networking, a necessary component of the business scene, has been experiencing a similar transformation of mission. What percent of us, I wonder, conscientiously attending networking breakfasts, luncheons, after-hours and the like, or courageously handing out cards and brochures to anyone within arms length, are catching the new unwritten dynamic which makes networking an expressway to success for some, and a rough path to nowhere for others. As a Life and Business Coach, I admit I've had the advantage of knowing how to meet and get to know potential clients, yet even so, it took time for me to appreciate the complex choreography of human relationship that happens at every networking event, from one-on-one for coffee to the city-wide Expo. What I began to see was that networkers with a "what's in it for me" mindset were failing, and those with a generous "I'm here to help" approach were succeeding. This simple analysis brought me to a definitive "aha" and I'm bursting to share with you what real networking is (and what it's not).

Here it is. "Networking as a contribution" is not about getting business or a job. It's not selling your product, and it's not even doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. Real networking is a contribution to society. It is about inspiring yourself and others to be the best contributor to society one can be, which includes providing the best possible products and services. Such networking is accomplished with great people who are the best in their field, and it's done in a way

that inspires you to do the same. This is a skill that generally takes time to develop, coming naturally to very few of us. You can definitely learn it. Go at a pace that works for you, breaking it down into stages so that the process will stretch you but won't break you. As you read on, note that I have chosen to illustrate positive and negative examples of networking by creating some humorously-named characters to represent the composite experience of actual people.

If you are not looking out for business for good people why should they look out for you?

The common misperception

The inspiration for this article originated after observing my friend, Jeff Killjobs, experience his first lay-off due to downsizing in the corporation where we met. I watched Jeff lose his job, then his house, and then repeatedly get turned down for job after job in the course of a year. I was concerned his family would be the next thing he would lose. I encouraged him to become involved in many valuable networking events, offering to take him with me, but he always came up with excuses of personal crises or the importance of being at every one of his son's soccer games. While I have the utmost admiration and respect for parents to be there for their children, I could also see his financial situation gradually worsening. My point? Jeff Killjobs was too bright and talented to be unemployed so long. It just didn't add up to me that he was not finding a job. As my last attempt, I offered him a scholarship to attend my "Becoming Recession Proof"

course. He turned me down for another soccer game. Obviously my messages to Jeff were not getting through, and it was becoming deeply painful to witness a friend going down hill. My intuition told me he was just sending his resume out over the Internet, meanwhile walking around wearing an invisible sign on his forehead which read "Someone Hire Me." I couldn't help envisioning Jeff in the not too distant future, clutching his son's soccer ball, looking for a cozy bridge to live under. Finally I confronted him about his seeming lack of motivation, to which he responded, "I just want somebody to give me t a job so I can make a difference." The point Jeff missed was that he could have been making a difference all along through his own initiative in networking, and the best time to start would have been while he was employed.

What makes it work

Real networking is based on the reality of caring about other people, and is achieved by actively referring good people to other good people. It is not about who I can "get" to buy my product and it is not about "helping your selected cronies" regardless of the quality of their work. I have found that real networking creates long-term referrals and clients. It is based on asking this one question: "How can I help this person I have just met?" With real networking, you know that when you refer someone, YOUR name goes with the referral (more about this later). You will also notice that you're more apt to help someone who has helped you. Now let's look more closely at what makes a real networker hum, what's makes them so memorable and effective. To emphasize their greatness, I like to call them "Super Hero Networkers."

Ten core behaviors of the “Super Hero Networker.”

1) Comes from contribution

A Super-Hero Networker comes from the perspective of 'how can I help great people meet and connect with other great people?' (Keep in mind, they view themselves as one of these great people, i.e., sincere and confident in their abilities.) Super-Hero Networkers are always looking for opportunities to network. I coached Mia Shy, who worked in property management, to strengthen her "networking muscle." She came back to our next session excited to share how the coaching had worked. Mia had been in Dillards and overheard a woman in line complaining to her friend about all of the junk e-mail she was receiving in her personal e-mail account, asking her friend if she knew a solution. Her friend replied she had no idea, but admitted she was having the same problem. Mia overcame her normal hesitancy and joined their conversation, telling them about a website she had just found for \$20 every six months that blocked junk e-mail; Mia simply asked her if she would like the website info. The woman said "sure," and Mia wrote the address on the back of her business card. They talked a bit more, and then the woman noticed the front of Mia's business card. She said she had a friend who was moving to the area who would be needing a house to rent, and that she would be glad to pass Mia's name on to her.

2) Builds lasting relationships

Aware that long-term clients and relationships can take time to develop, the Super Networker knows the investment of time creates payoff that lasts. A counter example illustrates this point. I met Dr. Myway at a Chamber of Commerce after-hours. He invited me to meet with him at a local coffee shop one morning. He wanted to discuss the Internet-based business he was involved in, plainly wanting me to encourage my friends to buy his products with a resulting commission to me. His idea of networking with me was nothing more than shameless selling of his products with absolutely no effort to know who I was or how we could help each other. Do you think I was inspired to do business with him or refer him to someone else? A firm and enduring NO.

3) Seeks opportunities to connect and honors connections

Few of us are naturals at this. The Super-powered understand the committed effort it takes to think about others when meeting new people, and how the networking muscle takes time to develop fully. You'll notice them carrying a palm pilot or a book of business cards that lists all of the "good people." With this readiness they can refer someone with the name, number, and business right on the spot--or if they meet a good referral resource, they record it ASAP. Realizing that their reputation goes with referrals, they may say

"use my name" to help you when you contact the other person. Others may want to give themselves more time to think through the referrals thoroughly, making contact with you later.

So, can there be consequences if we ignore the contribution of networking? I personally believe there is a strong connection. For example, over a period of about one year, I referred about 20 people to a very gifted massage therapist, Judy Responseless. Judy and I were good friends and had good rapport. Later I asked her why she had never referred any of her clients back to me. She replied, "I just don't think about it when I'm working with clients." Some months later, Judy

complained to me that her client load recently seemed to be diminishing, and she was worried about losing more clients. The moral: If we do not invest the time in referring others, why should someone else refer us?

Do you recognize and graciously accept acknowledgment ?

4) Pursues feedback

The Super-Hero Networker knows his name goes with his referrals. (It lets the recipient know how well-tested this referral is, in an honest but positive way). Everyone would like to have feedback from the person or business they have referred. There are a variety of ways to encourage feedback, depending on how well you know the person. Here's a sample referral technique for someone you've known a short time, whose services you haven't used, like Scott Newcomer, a likeable guy who does home remodeling, To refer someone to Scott, simply say: "Here's Scott's number, if you want to give him a call. I have never actually used him, but have a good impression of him. Let me know how Scott's service is so I will know if I should refer him again."

5) Cultivates clarity & openness

One of the greatest contributions you can make to another person is to allow them to contribute to you. When Networking Heroes get a referral, suggestion, or even criticism, they consider it a contribution. When receiving a referral or related feedback, they don't downplay their own importance or responsibility, choosing instead to deeply thank whoever is contributing to them. It's a key element in their repertoire of R-Powers. Too, they are aware that communicating clearly what a good customer looks like for them can open the referral door much wider. They learn to explain what they do and what their business is about in words that the specific person in front of them can understand.

A perfect example occurred with Jenny Jargon, a Data Security Analyst who came to me for coaching in looking for work. I noticed she was masterful at speaking the language of her field, though perhaps a little too masterful for the average person. I suggested she try explaining what she did so that even Bob the Wal-Mart Greeter could understand her skills and what kind of job

she was seeking. (Nothing against actual Wal-Mart Greeters everywhere; Bob at my neighborhood store is actually a great retired guy with three grandkids). The following week at church, Jenny tried this new method of “speaking to her audience.” She found herself talking with a sweet little widowed woman to whom she had previously mentioned she was looking for a job as a Data Security Analyst. This time she told her again in “Greeter” language, with a most surprising result. The woman replied, “Why didn’t you say that before? My son is a manager of a company that protects computers from bad things happening to them, and he needs to hire someone to help him. I’ll get you in touch with him tomorrow.”

6) Develops complementary allies

Super-Hero Networkers delight in developing the valuable asset of building relationships with people in complementary fields. Such relationships create an opportunity to send ongoing referrals back and forth. For example, a real estate broker, a house inspector, a handyman, and a loan officer could team up together and successfully expand their respective potential client bases. The field of home ownership is common to each of the team, yet their individual specialties are strategically complementary.

7) Represents a vibrant and passionate life

The TV is seldom on in Super Hero Headquarters, since they prefer to be volunteering with a favorite charity or pursuing an active hobby. Those who have passive interests of the couch potato variety have very little to talk about. Super-Hero Networkers know meaningful and interesting lives don’t just come to most of us, we have to create them. Always looking for ways to enhance life, they might volunteer with a position in the local Chamber of Commerce, take a personal development course, or assist with a leads group in an area that improves their skills. Super-Hero Networkers, when asked what they do, may give their hobby or favorite pastime as an answer. A great sales manager once said he wanted to know what type of books salespeople he was interviewing were reading. It let him know if they live life passively or actively. Super-Hero Networkers come in all shapes and sizes. The introverted Super-Heroes may have to work on getting out there more, and the extroverted may have to work on listening more.

8) Looks on all interactions as opportunities to help

Every encounter with another person may be a networking opportunity, especially when they are in the role of a consumer. In addition, the person that you receive great service from, someone you’ve heard does great work, or even the person you purchase from--can be a possible referral. Every interaction you have can create a positive or negative impression. An acquaintance named John Overboard had a style of networking that was alienating others. He would show great interest in buying someone’s product, then avoid contact with the seller, never telling them he had

changed his mind. He was developing a reputation for this. Someone even confronted him and said, “Look, are you interested or not?” He said, “Oh I am, I’m just very busy.” Other people would ask me, “What’s up with John? He seemed so interested in my product at first...” Wouldn’t you be hesitant to refer clients to John? Noticing the pattern, I encouraged John to say ‘no’ when he meant no, and ‘yes’ when he meant yes. Super-Hero Networkers work hard to be conscious of how they show up in all interactions.

9) Strives for quality of connections vs. quantity

If our Super Hero had a maxim it might be: It is better to meet a few people well than 20 people superficially. Instead of trying to meet as many people as possible. Super Networkers spend sufficient time to know something specific about the person they just met. People notice superficiality immediately. The room floater fortunately is quickly assessed as shallow, reflecting badly on his product or capability. The right and effective way to develop a quality relationship is having an honest and sincere desire to engage and get to know other’s interests and concerns. Pace yourself, give yourself enough time for you to know people and for them to know you, and you may be surprised how many people you really meet.

10) Honors the letter and intention of the word

All the networking in the world is worthless if one does not deliver a product or service that he or she believes in, with integrity. Integrity is at the core, you do what you say you are going to do. Super-Hero Networkers only sell the products or provide the services worthy of their word. If the product or service degrades the Super-Hero Networker, they take action to correct the problem or find another product or service to support. Ask yourself these questions to monitor your progress toward Super Hero status (I have found them useful for myself):

Do you know the top people who have referred people to you and are you in contact with them on an ongoing basis, calling them with no agenda?

Do you seek opportunities to help good people connect to other good people?

Do you keep the intent and letter of your word (do what you say you are going to do)?

Are you clear on the best products or services you have to offer the next person you meet?

Can you communicate what you do in a way that they understand?

Do you recognize and graciously accept acknowledgment from good referrals?

Reflections on the larger network

Imagine what this world would be like if we really focused on networking to connect to the best people, and, in the process, inspired them to keep being their best, allowing them to do the same for us?

People often complain about non-reputable businesses succeeding. You can change this by helping the best businesses succeed, by becoming your own version of a Super-hero Networker. What is your edge? What is the area in networking in which you are great, an area you can embrace and improve?

To paraphrase words of wisdom from an unknown source: A famous person leaves you impressed with how powerful he is. A great person leaves you with the gift of how powerful you are! May all the people you network with walk away from you with more of the gift that they are, and you will never be forgotten.

To find out more about the course, "Networking as a Contribution", please contact Martin Brossman at Martin@CoachingSupport.com with your name, address, phone # and a request to be put on the notification list or call: (919) 847-4757.

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(All from the Research Triangle Park, NC area)

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