



NETWORKING GRACE: BUILDING YOUR NETWORK WITH SINCERITY

By Gail Alofsin

The Miriam dictionary defines networking as *“the exchange of information or services among individuals, groups, or institutions, specifically: the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or business.”* We all know that networking is important for our growth, both personally and professionally. Yet there are so many times that we skip an event, conference, or meeting offering a myriad of excuses. *“Err, another networking event – I did not meet anyone the last time.” “I can skip this one – there will be more.” “It’s raining, too cold, too hot.” “I’ve had a long day – I am too tired.” “I won’t know anyone.” “I don’t know what to say.”* Excuses, excuses! Let’s face the facts - you are not going to meet anyone by sitting in your office or home on the couch.

Since January, 1999, I have had the privilege of welcoming over 1000 students to my classroom at the University of Rhode Island. Additionally, I have worked with over 100 interns. Whether teaching in the journalism, public relations, communications, business or the library science department, the focus of the class was the importance of relationships.

How extensive is your network? Relationships expand well beyond who you know and who knows you. Are

your friends on Facebook and contacts on LinkedIn relationships that will return your text, phone call or email within 24 hours? Do you reach out solely when you need something? What do you do to keep in touch with these contacts and to assist others?

To be effective at networking with a give first, gain second focus, I recommend natural and sincere networking, with GRACE (**G**ratITUDE, **R**elationships, **A**ttitude, **C**ommunication, **E**nthusiasm).

Gratitude

Be grateful for the opportunity to network. Whether you are a student or a seasoned employee, you have a network. Your network is comprised of friends, friends of friends, classmates, alumni, career services, organizations, community, non-profit organizations and professionals in both your field of business and other corporations. If you are new to a community, offer to volunteer. Everyone has an expertise and an extra set of hands is always welcome. Smile, be pleasant, introduce yourself to others and be grateful for the *opportunity* to help others. Attend career and alumni events at your alma mater, high school and college reunions. Do your best to attend monthly business breakfasts and receptions in your community. Share your knowledge by offering to speak at a local chamber event or regional conference. Your ideas, advice and knowledge will be most welcome. You may have skills that have yet to be discovered and offering your energy and time will serve to excavate these assets. Be thankful for your gifts. And, say "thank you" often. Gratitude is best when shared with action and words.

Relationships

Set a goal for what you want to accomplish at the event. Are there key decision makers you would like to meet? One way to meet the attendees is to volunteer at the registration table. Request a list of attendees a week in advance and do your homework. As you determine the people you would like to meet, review their profiles on LinkedIn, their corporate website and press releases regarding their respective business. Do you have anything in common – hometown, schools, sports, experience or interests?

Networking is a full time job versus an afterthought, leading to new and future business. As you meet people, in addition to learning about them, you have the opportunity to showcase your business and interests. Staying in touch, in a meaningful way, will assist you in forming, maintaining and expanding a strong contact base and circle of influence.

Attitude

View networking as an opportunity to meet new people, spend time with colleagues, reinforce current relationships and learn new things. In the spirit of the Girls Scouts, "*Make new friends, but keep the old; one is silver and the other's gold.*"

Be open to meeting new people versus spending the event "visiting" with a few people that you already know. Set a goal for the number of meaningful contacts that you would like to make. Networking is not about meeting everyone in the room, yet you should depart with a sense of accomplishment.

Your attitude should be one of "give" versus "gain." I truly believe that when you give first in networking, your gain will be exponential. We all have expectations of what we would like to garner from networking opportunities. As we listen to others, we learn about their goals and aspirations. How can we assist them? As your network grows, how can you help others enhance their career or achieve their goals through your contacts?

Approach networking with a positive attitude, self-confidence and open mind. As you meet people, offer a firm handshake, sincere smile and eye contact. Practice listening. Good listening skills are honed at every encounter. Do your best to offer meaningful and impactful conversation – avoid any negative stories or gossip. You do not want people to share negative news that you imparted as this will brand you as a person who cannot be trusted and further, does not have anything significant to share.

Communication

Everything Communicates! From your "grand entrance," to your handshake, attire and body language; your message is conveyed. My mother always counselled us: "*to be interesting, be interested.*" Ask questions that focus on the other person, listen thoroughly and do your best not to interrupt. When you concentrate more on listening than talking; it is a sign of respect. A few questions that you might ask include: "*What an interesting job you have, how did you get started?*" "*What are current trends in your industry?*" "*What do you enjoy doing when you are not working?*" "*Have you attended this networking event in the past?*" Stay current in regard to news, movies and books. Become an expert in your respective field of study or interest.

Craft your "elevator pitch." An elevator pitch is a concise summation of who you are and what you do, best limited to under a minute. Prepare one or two in order to have an appropriate, succinct and memorable introduction for the select audience. If you are a student, you could include your area of interest,

experience and internships. A recent grad might choose to add career aspirations. If you are working, do your best to focus on what you do in a creative and interesting way. If you are in search of a job you are a "resource" looking for an opportunity! What are memorable and interesting points that you can get across in three minutes, inspiring the listener to offer assistance in your job search?

Enthusiasm

When you are passionate about other people, networking to give versus gain, following up on promises made and staying in touch in a meaningful way, you will be branded as an enthusiastic professional who people enjoy spending time with. This positive energy becomes an extension of your personal and professional brand.

Our brand is the perception other people have of our accomplishments, contributions and personality. We spend our entire career cultivating and protecting our brand, personally and professionally. Professionally, what is the word on the street about you? Establish yourself as an expert in your field. Earn a reputation for quality performance, and use your gifts to assist others in your community and beyond. Mentor a student, volunteer for a non-profit, join a board, or contribute your energy and knowledge to a project. In the workplace, you want to be present versus "on strike" at work. In other words, "don't leave before you leave." Build a reputation via your actions and contributions as a "must have" employee.

Are you ready to network? Pack your networking toolkit with a smile, positive attitude and neat attire. Bring plenty of business cards, pack your breath mints and have a great time!

As a sales & marketing executive for Newport Harbor Corporation, Adjunct Professor at the Harrington School of Communications & Digital Literacy at the University of Rhode Island, active volunteer and board member, and international keynote speaker (gailspeaks.com), Gail Lowney Alofsin does her best to merge these separate vocations (and identities!) while assisting others with natural and sincere networking. Her book, *Your "Someday" is NOW! What are YOU Waiting for?*, focused on the integration of life and work in addition to building your personal brand, was published in March 2014. Gail can be reached at 401-640-4418 or gailalofsin@yahoo.com. Follow Gail on Twitter - @gailalofsin.