

Making the Connection — “Good” Networking

David J. Evans & Denise Benatar d.life Lab (2014)

A BRIEF Q&A about what is and isn’t involved in making healthy connections in the marketplace.

MAKING GOOD CONNECTIONS VS. SLIMY NETWORKING

We put this question first not because it’s most important, but because for those students for whom this is an issue—it’s got to be dealt with up front before any real engagement can begin. Lots of students enter this process with a very understandable aversion to “networking”. The term conjures up images of slick, self – interested people manipulating others to get things they don’t deserve, or hucksters pretending to care about someone just for the purpose of using them to get to someone else. These negative images are powerful and reinforced by lots of characters in films and novels, as well as too many real people we’ve encountered or heard about. The good news is that while these archetypes are not without real-life examples, they are by far the minority.

IT’S A NOUN MORE THAN A VERB

The point isn’t to “do” network-ing, the goal is to participate in the network. Simply put—it just means to join a conversation. Every domain of human endeavor is held together by a web of relationships between persons. That web is the net that undergirds, contains, and holds that part of society. The Stanford “network” holds Stanford together. The Silicon Valley “network” is the broad and loose community of West Coast folk that al-

lows tech entrepreneurship to flourish. Most individuals have both a professional network (of colleagues) and a personal network (of friends and family). The most common way for people to be introduced across professional networks is by referrals from personal networks. This isn’t nepotism, it’s just communal behavior. Nepotism occurs when personal relationships are used to knowingly manipulate illegitimate outcomes to the detriment of an organization. The use of personal or professional networks to initiate new people into a community’s conversation is a good thing. An introduction isn’t a decision or an offer—it’s just permission to explore the possibilities. The more introductions that can get made, the better decisions organizations can make. Most (80%) of the opportunities that occur in a given domain are surfaced and fulfilled via these webs of relationships. The network operates to sustain the work.

What we’re suggesting you do is connect with the members of a community of human endeavor and engage them in a conversation to learn more about where you want to deploy yourself in the world. That’s a win-win—it helps you find out what you want to do and where, and it helps the various communities of doers in the world meet and invite in the people who can sustain and grow their enterprise. The best way to find out where you may want to go is to talk to people who live there.

BUT AREN’T I BOTHERING THEM?

No, you’re just asking for directions as a courtesy from people who live in the neighborhood. After people have been out in the world for any period of time, they come to realize that most things get done through relationships. The healthiest meritocracy in the world still needs to find people and can only apply its merit criteria when people and their work become visible to them. Relationships are most often the means whereby people become visible—it’s how things get started. Knowing that, most professionals happily accept that they need to refresh the community by bringing new people into the conversation. That motivation is why they are willing to provide referrals to other people who can help you.

For some students, having an information interview seems fine—after all that’s a substantive interaction—but getting referrals feels like the hard part. When you just want someone to provide a referral to someone else—doesn’t the referrer feel slighted or used? Rarely. People understand what referrals are for and typically aren’t offended that you are trying to get somewhere else. If a stranger stops a local and asks directions—the local isn’t offended that the stranger doesn’t know her way around town. Most people remember what it’s like to be lost and are happy to help if they can. It’s the same with getting referrals, which is just a variation on asking for directions from the locals.

And yes. Sometimes you may be bothering them, but that’s not because you’re asking—it’s because it’s a bad time for them, which isn’t your fault. That’s why some people don’t get back to you.

They're seldom offended—they're just booked up. This happens to all of us and is just built into the system. There's no way around this since the only way for people to never be bothered is to never be contacted—which would be a disaster. Don't be unduly concerned about this. You may occasionally bother someone, but it's not a big deal and it only lasts for a moment.

Don't confuse "bother" with "offend". Some people do act truly offensively. They lie. They misrepresent. They're arrogant or presumptuous. They're rude or ungrateful. Just don't be one of those people, and you'll be fine.

WHY WOULD THEY TALK TO ME? WHAT'S IN IT FOR THEM?

Some students feel selfish about asking for an information interview thinking, "What's in it for them? I ask all these questions, and it's just about me. They don't get anything out of it, do they?" Actually they get a lot out of it (which is why they so often say yes to this invitation). They get to discuss their life and their work. They get to do their "field" a favor by encouraging the right kind of young persons to get involved in their community and profession. They get the affirmation of having someone else value their work and experience. And lastly, they get the pleasure of talking with an energetic and sincere young adult (see next question). Never underestimate the attractiveness of engaging with another person who cares about what you care about.

WHAT DO I NEED TO DO THIS (THE GOLD STANDARD FOR INFO INTERVIEWING)?

The classic answers to this question are all impor-

tant. You need to do your homework on the person and the organization, you need to have your questions ready to go, you need to show up on time at the right place, etc. etc. But, while critical, that's all secondary. The Gold Standard requirement for a successful information interview is just one thing—sincere curiosity. Genuine interest and a desire to learn more are the most important things, which of course are evidenced in good homework and lots of good questions. If you bring a truly energized inquirer to an honest conversation, your chances of success are terrific. It is this genuine interest that so often causes the 30 minute scheduled coffee to become the 90 minute brunch.

THEY DIDN'T RESPOND—NOW WHAT?

People are busy and email is easy to miss or ignore. If you're using email (be it for referral or scheduling a conversation), send your first inquiry and give it 5-7 business days. If you get nothing, send another one and wait another 5-7 business days. Then send a third. If three doesn't work, then let it go—they're disinterested or more likely just too busy. Everyone struggles with email volume, so it's perfectly OK to respectfully renew an inquiry. If you have been referred, remember to put the referrer's name in your subject line to distinguish your note ("Coffee Invitation from John Schmutz' Stanford Friend").

And yes—you will encounter some rejection. This process isn't foolproof. Some people are too busy. Some don't want to talk. Some are rude (or are just having a bad week). Don't be daunted by those folks. What matters is that there are plenty of people you can connect with successfully.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW ETIQUETTE

After the interview, be sure and send a thank you either by email or snail mail.

If your contact referred you to someone else and you follow up, be sure and take the opportunity to briefly let your contact know how your referral experience went. This is both a common courtesy to inform your contact of the outcome and it gives you an additional chance to connect.

GOT MORE QUESTIONS?!

Of course you do! There are lots of things to talk about here which we've not touched. Check out some other articles and great materials from the Stanford CDC site:

<http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/cdc/networking/how-to>

<http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/cdc/networking/informational-int>

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704513104575256421087880394.html?mod=WSJ_Careers_CareerJournal_4#articleTabs%3Darticle

If you have remaining questions, email Dave Evans (djevans4@stanford.edu), and we'll keep updating this document.

Have a great time making good and healthy connections to join the web of relationships in areas you'd like to learn more about. There are lots of helpful people waiting there who are willing to talk to you, you just have to find them and ask. 