

Know How to Network

Young men will often start to focus on networking only when they are looking for a job. Perhaps after graduation, or with the loss of a previous job.

This is the wrong way to think of networking – and the reason why so many people think of it in a negative light.

True networking is about giving. When you do so, a natural byproduct will be others giving back to you.

What Business Networking Is NOT:

Putting in effort only when you need something, such as a job or a sale. You will come across as a taker. Not one wants to be around a man who grabs everything for himself without .

Arriving at an event, handing out 50 business cards in 25 minutes, and then heading out the door hoping that you convert a few “prospects” into sales.

Showing up to a job fair with 1000 other applicants and jockeying for position so you can pitch a recruiter for 30 seconds on why you are the man for the job.

So, What Is Networking?

Business networking is the art of managing mutually beneficial relationships. It’s about giving value and receiving value in return. It’s a long-term process. One that a man cultivates over an entire career and protects with his good name.

Professional networking, in its essence, boils down to two things:

- **Building Awareness**
- **Being Referable**

Part 1: Awareness – The Importance of Being Visible

My family uses two vehicles, a truck (mine) and a minivan (my wife’s). Every year I spend a sizeable amount of money on maintenance with a mechanic 30 miles away. There is also a great mechanic (from what I hear) who runs a shop one mile from my house. So why do I drive out of my way for this common service?

It boils down to awareness. In 2007, when I needed to decide about car repair, I was only aware of the mechanic whose shop was across from my son’s daycare, which just happened to be around 30 miles from home in Shawano, WI. I walked in, was impressed with the owner’s knowledge, and have been happy with his work ever since.

The point is, we generally hire the best people we can find within our network. We rarely hold out for the perfect job candidate, as businesses have to, well, do business.

So how do you get out in front of the person you need to be seen by?

Awareness Tip #1: Engage Your Circle of Influence

Your personal network starts with the people you already know. For most of us that includes friends, families, co-workers past and present, and people we went to school with. Stay in touch with all of them and let everyone know what you are looking for – whether it's a service need or a new career. You never know when someone is going to turn from a passing acquaintance into a useful contact. The internet has made keeping up on old acquaintances much easier. Now you have no excuse. Keep an eye on where all your old friends and classmates have moved to and what they're up to. Lightly engage with them and sincerely ask how their careers and lives are developing. Any deep relationship always starts with a shallow beginning.

Most people are passive about connecting with old friends or classmates, so you'll need to be the proactive one. Send real holiday and birthday cards and be sure to always send a nice note, or at least an email, for events like marriages, children, new jobs, etc. People really do remember these things.

You probably won't see much immediate reward for your diligence, but you'll be remembered more clearly than all the other old friends, relations, co-workers, and so on that haven't bothered to send the occasional greeting card or online message.

What this means is that you'll have the hard work already done when you need assistance from one of those friends. It'll also encourage them to come to you for favors, giving you a chance to increase your likeability as well as your presence in their life.

Awareness Tip #2: Talk to Strangers

You never know where you're going to make a professional connection.

Increase your chances of doing so by being social when you're out in public. Talk to the person next to you at the hotel bar. Ask your local barista how they're doing. Circulate at parties and introduce yourself to new people, rather than clustering with the guests you already know.

The art of conversation is a forgotten skill, and it seems like most young men are content with putting their heads down and texting or checking their Twitter feed. Break yourself of this habit.

Now I admit – talking to new people takes a bit of courage. Cultivate it. Practice approaching strangers, offering your hand, and simply saying, "Hi there! I don't think we've met. My name's ____."

This basic skill will work everywhere from a neighborhood tavern to a black-tie gala. Be prepared to follow it up with simple, neutral questions like, “What brings you here?” Not everyone is good at talking to strangers, and you can expect to be the one guiding the conversation at first.

From time to time it won't come off right. You'll get someone who's shy, or snobby, or just distracted, and the conversation will end almost as soon as it begins. But the best thing about introducing yourself (and being good at doing so) is that you can move right on to the next person and do it again.

Master this skill in today's day and age and you'll be way ahead of most young men.

Awareness Tip #3: Follow Up

Meeting people is great. But to actually network you have to get them to connect with you after that first meeting, otherwise you're just a fading memory (if that).

The best ways to follow up are:

- Give out accurate contact information.
- Give a reason for the other person to follow up with you.

For example: Business cards with basic contact info are a dime a dozen at conferences. But if you hand a person a card with a handwritten invitation, “Send me an e-mail and I'll see if I know anyone with an opening in your field,” etc., you're much more likely to actually get that e-mail.

Business cards are still the most convenient way to give someone your contact info (at least in person), but smartphones have made it possible to send an e-mail, Facebook or LinkedIn invite, or other electronic contact right then and there. Make use of all the available options. Someone looking for a job (or to hire someone) is going to get more use out of your LinkedIn page, while a potential social contact will do better with your phone number and e-mail address. Also, be aware of your industry standards. If you're in San Francisco looking for a tech job, you'll want to be using the latest connection apps. If you're looking for construction management work in St Louis, however, stick with business cards.

When someone gives you this sort of information, it's worth your while to do exactly what you'd want them to. Follow up on it the next day with a short e-mail or phone call. Some people are wary of giving too much contact information out publicly, which is a valid concern in this day and age. If you're worried about strangers having your information, it's worth getting a second phone line or email address that you can have printed on your business cards. That way you're never giving out the information you use with friends and families.

A small trick I employ is the use of a professional name (Antonio) with all my business associates and my nickname (Tony) with friends and family. This small separation allows me to quickly filter messages and phone calls.

Awareness Tip #4: Maintain Your Online Presence

To begin, let me be clear here – not all of us need to be using Facebook, LinkedIn, or any of the other social networks (and most of us could do well by not being on them every single day).

Some professions just don't need online networking, and some professionals selectively choose to remain offline in order to focus on business practices that worked for them well before the invention of the internet.

That said, the first thing many of us do before contacting a stranger is search their name online to see who they are and brush up on the relevant personal details, so it can pay to create a profile on social networking sites.

There are literally hundreds of social platforms out there. I'll talk about four.

1. **LinkedIn** – This is by far the social networking platform most men should be on. It's not only a place to post your resume and work experience, but also a rich source of news, business advice, and a great place to meet people before you attend networking events. Most of all, I want to stress that this is the right place for networkers because everyone on the platform understands that we're here to do business. It's not to socialize or read up on gossip, which can't be said for the others.
2. **Facebook** – If you have a personal profile, keep it private and never post anything you wouldn't want a prospective boss to see. If you're starting your own business or promoting a product, Facebook offers a huge upside as it makes creating a business page simple.
3. **Google+** – This newer network is much smaller than Facebook. I put it on this list because a profile on Google+ will give you a leg up in Google search results. If you're a young artist looking to show the world your portfolio, making it easily found on Google's preferred social network is a smart move.
4. **Twitter** – The network of instant information, these profiles pop up high in the search results but are best left for those looking to break into fields that actually use it. Public relations, marketing, and other media type professions might take note if you show a mastery of this tool.

Awareness Tip #5: Accept Offline Invitations

Get out there and physically meet people.

If a professional contact wants to have lunch and you can spare the time, do it. If a friend has a poetry reading at the local coffee shop, go support her with an open mind. Stop by parties for at least a little while. And so on.

However strong your online networking skills are, the best contacts are still made face-to-face.

Large public gatherings expose you to people who you would never find a “shared interest” with using online profiles, but who just might have opportunities for you all the same. Networking is unpredictable, and you never know who’s going to turn out to be a stroke of blind luck.

Part 2: Be Referable – The Importance of Others Being Able to Pass You Along

The power of networking isn’t that you’ll actually be able to pitch yourself to a prospective employer. No, the real power is that one of your connections will do it for you. Why? Because referable men are valuable men. They have a definable skill set needed by certain groups, businesses, and individuals. An F-18 technician, a .NET programmer, a distance swimming coach — each of these professionals offers value and is referable. What they offer to the marketplace is clear.

Companies pay recruiters large sums to help find them the right people. If someone in your network refers you to the perfect job opening, they have delivered value to two people in their network – you, of course, but also the employer.

But how do you become someone who is referable?

Referable Tip #1: Be Memorable

The most important tip to being referable is to be memorable. If a person doesn’t remember what you do or how you can help others in their network, they can’t refer you to their friends, EVEN if they want to.

Have a tight 30-second elevator pitch about who you are and what you can offer. Also, if time permits, have an example success story to share. People remember stories, not facts and figures.

Example:

Stranger: “So Antonio, what do you do?”

Me: “Well you know how most men dress poorly?”

Stranger: “Yeah, sure.”

Me: “Well I run a company that teaches men how to dress better so they can succeed in business. In fact, I just helped a young man last week from Iowa rebuild his wardrobe. He went through a round of five interviews over five days with a big consulting company in Chicago and never once had to worry about his clothing. He got the job. I like to think, in part, because he was able to focus in on what’s important and not worry about looking like a kid from the cornfields.”

OK – so at this point I’ve spoken for 30 seconds. Yet I’ve created a powerful and memorable image of who I am and what I do.

The man I'm speaking with doesn't need any clothing or help dressing sharp. However, 30 minutes later he introduces me to a colleague to whom he has already repeated my story. The man I'm introduced to admits he needs to build a wardrobe – the perfect prospective client.

Be memorable, and when people find someone who needs your services, they will make the introduction.

Referable Tip #2: Dress to Impress

Your very first impression at any face-to-face meeting is visual. Everything else comes after that.

Being well-dressed makes you seem less threatening when you approach strangers, more influential when people are evaluating your usefulness as a contact, and more attractive to potential friends or romantic interests.

You certainly don't have to go through life in a business suit, and in fact you should be actively avoiding business wear when you attend social events (unless it's called for). But upgrading from jeans and a t-shirt to slacks and a dress shirt with a sports jacket for your default "around town" outfit can make a huge difference in your networking.

Referable Tip #3: Offer Sincere Compliments

If you admire something about someone, there's no shame in telling them. It creates a feeling of goodwill, and people want to be around people who make them feel good. The best compliments are based off a little research or close observation. Perhaps the gentleman you're speaking with is a newly hired teacher at a local junior college – congratulate him on the position and ask about the challenges he's facing as a new faculty member. Perhaps the woman to your left mentioned her book earlier in the night – point out that you admire the commitment writers have and ask her to talk about the experience of being an author.

Never lay a compliment on too thick or expand beyond a simple one-sentence compliment. Use them to break the ice and then lead into a natural conversation.

At the end of the evening, what you talked about may be forgotten. The way you made others feel, though, is remembered.

Referable Tip #4: Listen & Show Interest

Listen to what the people you meet are saying instead of just waiting for your turn to speak. Ask intelligent questions and show a genuine interest in the conversation. This means that you stop checking your smartphone every three minutes to see if you received an email or text – it really is a sign of disrespect. Personally, I turn my phone completely off at networking events to avoid temptation.

When you're first meeting someone you want to use the words "I" and "me" sparingly. You'll have to use them a few times, obviously ("My name is..." etc.) but limit yourself. Resist the urge to identify with the other person's story by relating it to your life.

Instead, ask easy questions about the other person. If it's a business event, "What do you do?" is always reliable, as is, "How long have you lived in town?" It may take a few of these until you hit on the one that makes them expand beyond one-sentence answers, so always have a couple ready to go in any conversation.

Referable Tip #5: Be of Specific Use

The funny thing is that this last tip is the real reason why a person should hire or partner with you. Why is it last on the list, then? In most networking situations you're not going to speak with the hiring manager right off.

Instead, you'll more likely find yourself in a conversation with one of their sales reps or other associates. If you start the conversation with a 15-minute one-sided discussion about how you can code in six programming languages you're going to get the eyes-glossed-over look two minutes into the conversation.

Really, they don't care about the coding. And that's the problem. When networking, we try to ram our usefulness down other people's throats. Rather than trying to impress, look to be of use. **Ask about them and learn about their issues, then see if you can provide value from your wide range of skillsets.**

Imagine if this same sales rep mentioned how a bug in their system continuously caused him and his team to show up unprepared to a client's office. Even though you haven't done this type of work for a year, you might be able to offer a solution they hadn't considered, and then 15 minutes later that same sales rep is introducing you to the hiring manager who was in another room.

Be a useful man and opportunity will seek you out.

Immediate Action – What Can You Do Today?

The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The second-best time is now.

I can't remember where I read this, but it is the best advice I can give a young man who is just starting and perhaps feels behind.

The simple answer is (and there is no way to shortcut this): you have to earn people's trust. That's how relationships have been, and will always be, built. So, start building your network today, right now. Ask for help, offer value, and maintain the relationships.

And remember, the best networkers build strong relationships before they ever need them.