

Adding Value to Your Network

Social media sites have provided a convenient way to stay connected with people personally and professionally. There are many ways to utilize these sites, however the results you get are correlated with the value of the connections you have. It is important to remember that the quantity of connections does not indicate their quality.

When building your network, think beyond adding numbers to adding value. Take advantage daily of opportunities to make personal connections with people and then add them to your network. From the cafeteria, to cross-divisional meetings, to trainings outside the company, opportunities are all around you.

Keep the following eight steps in mind when you have opportunities to make personal connections and you'll continue to see the value of your network grow.

1. **Have a purpose and a plan.** Regardless of where your opportunity is to make a new connection, have a plan going in. Is there a particular person you want to meet? Do you want to connect personally with someone you've only spoken with on the phone? Do you want to meet all of the individuals on a team you'll be collaborating with on a project? One of the best ways to meet someone is to be introduced by someone he or she respects. Don't be afraid to ask a mutual connection to make the introduction.
2. **Resist the temptation of comfort.** Walking into a room full of people, especially strangers, is difficult for most people. The easiest and most comfortable thing to do is to sit by and talk with someone you know well. Doing this is choosing comfort over building your network. Make a point to always sit by someone new in a meeting to give yourself an opportunity to develop a new connection.
3. **Make a personal connection by remembering names.** Most people struggle with remembering names. We meet someone new and then seconds later are embarrassed because we can't remember his or her name. Often it is because our focus is on something other than the name during the introduction. Focus on the name by repeating it both in your head and out loud. (It's nice to meet you, Sara.) Making a mental association with a physical characteristic or something he or she says is also helpful. (Sara likes to ski.) If you realize you've forgotten someone's name after hearing it, speak up. (I'm sorry; I missed your name.)

4. **Ignore distractions to enhance engagement.** Distractions keep us from making emotional connections because they take our attention away from that person. Force yourself to focus and you will be less likely to attend to a person walking by, a vibrating phone, or even competing thoughts. One effective way to stay focused is to make it a point to learn something new about each person you meet. It could be a work experience, an interesting travel destination, something about his or her family, etc. Entering the conversation with this mindset will not only help you focus, it will also help you make an emotional connection and remember the person better.
5. **Become fluent and comfortable with small talk.** A study at the Stanford University School of Business tracked MBAs 10 years after they graduated. They found that while grade point averages had no bearing on their success, the ability to converse with others did. Like it or not, the ability to make small talk and develop rapport is an important skill for anyone interested in developing an effective network. When done effectively, small talk relaxes you and the other person, allowing for a better connection. You'll find a little preparation makes small talk much easier. Go into each situation with a handful of topics to discuss. Just be sure to avoid negative or controversial topics.
6. **Pay attention to your body language.** People who look uncomfortable will make others uncomfortable. Display confident body language even when you're nervous. Confident body language includes keeping shoulders back, engaging eye contact, smiling, and remaining physically open. Combine that with a strong, confident tone and people will be more likely to be drawn to you as someone they would like to meet.
7. **Master the art of asking good questions.** Ideally, you want to listen more than you talk. Too often when we meet someone new, we try to fill the gaps in communication by talking about ourselves. People like others who listen and are more likely to form a positive opinion of you if you're a good listener. To accomplish that, be prepared with questions to keep others talking. A good way to come up with questions is to start with "What do you think of...?" or "What is your take on...?" "What did you learn from...?" "What was that experience like?" Finish the question with something specific to the event, the company, the competition, the project, current events, or as a follow up to something just said.
8. **Follow up with every new contact.** Within twenty-four hours of meeting someone, follow up with an email letting him or her know you enjoyed the conversation. Personalize it with something specific that you discussed. Finally, follow up with an invitation to join your social network. You have then added not just a number but also someone with whom you have a real connection.

Social networking sites can be great tools to help us stay connected. Give some thought to the connections you have. Are they quality connections or just numbers? Following the eight steps above will help you make a quality connection initially and increase the value of your network overall.