

Inspiration + **I**nfluence, **I**ntegrity and **I**nformation = Ethical, Effective Networking!

The “**I**’s” have it!

By Donna Messer

I'm often asked for the secrets to my success as one of Canada's most influential women in business. My reply in almost every case is that my influence isn't surrounding who I am, rather whom I know, and how I use that knowledge.

The use of that knowledge is called “Social Capital”, and to be successful you have to take the time to really get to know those people who are currently in your database. While it's wonderful to have a large contact list, it's worth absolutely nothing unless you know who is on that list, and what you know about them. You must be able to add value to them, as well as to yourself.

Developing that contact list and learning more about each contact's Social Capital isn't really that difficult if you take the time to establish a networking system that provides you with the template you need to fill in the blanks. I use a system called FloWork - it provides me with a check list that gives me the opportunity to really get to know each person I meet that I choose to include in my contact base. Once the decision has been made to get to know that contact, I simply use my “top ten tips” and begin the process.

It's important to know how best to connect with my new contact in the future. If it's by phone, what is the name of the person who answers it? If it is by email - what should I put in the subject line to catch my new contacts attention? And if it is by fax, is the line dedicated, or should I phone first? Once I've established the best method of communication, I begin the second step. Getting to know my new contact, not just from a professional perspective, but also from a personal one. It's important to me to find ways to build a relationship with that contact without appearing to self-serving. People like people who are like themselves - I need to find that common denominator before making the next contact.

I love research and all of the search engines are my best friends! I know how to ask the right questions, and I inevitably find out all about my new contact. I visit their website if there is one, I read all about their corporate identity, and I look at areas where they have a social conscience. Where do they spend their time when it comes to volunteering? Do they have a favourite charity? Are they active in the community? Once I have found out as much as I can about my new contact - I update my database and include what I've discovered. I also make note of any “key contacts” or resources that I could share with my new contact. It's a great ice breaker to reconnect with a gift of an introduction that could be valuable to that new contact.

Now that the homework is done and the social capital is beginning - it's time to reconnect with the contact. I've done my exploring and I have enough information that I can be comfortable reconnecting and offering something of value or interest to my contact. I've also found a common denominator by this time - we share the same interest in a charity, we volunteer within the same sector or we have children the same age who participate in minor hockey! Whatever I've found in common, I maximize it, when I make that next contact. I never try to sell my product or service, I always try to find a way to offer my help. In fact, if you call my office or meet me in person, the first thing you will hear is “how can we help you?” We believe that business develops once the system is in place - and the system says start by building rapport. Once the rapport is

built, it's time to exchange information, which is the time to share what you do, what you need and how you might be able to add value to each other. It's really a lot like dating, but instead of looking for that perfect life partner, we look for that perfect business partner.

The contact feels comfortable with me, because I've taken the time to not only get to know him, I've found our common interests. I've shared resources and I've offered to help in any way I can. The contact will take my next call - because I didn't try to sell him anything, I was strictly building that relationship.

I'll monitor that contact, and I'll send relevant articles, make strategic introductions and keep in touch. I'll send a copy of my latest newsletter, even interview them for an upcoming article for one of the magazines I write for. Whatever I do, it is to bond with that contact and to expand my knowledge of their social capital.

The time will come when I need help, not monetary, but something that will involve their area of expertise. In most cases, I will ask for and get a reliable solution. It could be a financial problem for a client, it could be a legal one - whatever it is, I know that I have an "expert" who will provide me with their solution. The results? I can shine a little in their light, as they help one of my contacts solve a problem or find a solution. Did I generate income from this - absolutely not! But what I did was to build a stronger link in that chain of connections that will ultimately come back to me.

My networking system is ethical - it is important to me to make sure that my contact has the integrity I need when I make that introduction. That introduction is for help, not the sale of a product or service. If a sale results and both sides are happy with the interaction so much the better, but in the beginning of each introduction it is for the mutual benefit of both sides.

Today there is a new culture of integrity. Networking is strategic, it's systematic and it's structured. It's important to recognize that we can "network and get work", but a systematic process must be followed in order to maximize who you know, and what you know about them. Sharing contacts and resources is key to success, but only if it's ethical, so that both sides win!

Donna Messer is an author, speaker and is considered Canada's networking Guru. She coaches corporations in the effective art of networking using the RISE philosophy. Her networking system is used throughout North America to effectively monitor and measure results. She can be reached at www.connectuscanada.com

Top Ten Tips for Effective Networking (side bar)

1. Keep your business cards in your right pocket.
2. Collect business cards and place in your left pocket.
3. Wear your badge on the right side.
4. Ask how best to communicate for future contact.
5. Ask for the name of the person who answers the phone.
6. Ask if the fax line is dedicated.
7. Send all emails with relevant information in the subject line.
8. Do your homework before reconnecting, use the FloWork system.
9. Use the RISE Philosophy - Rapport, Information, Solutions, Ethically.
10. Make each connection profitable for both sides.