



8 Networking Skills that Every Professional Needs to Have

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When it comes to most advice on networking, many business publications place too much emphasis on “what’s easy” rather than “what works”.

This has only been amplified by the recent dominant presence of social media.

With useless “tips” like:

‘Set up a LinkedIn profile!’

‘Get active on Twitter!’

‘And... um, email people I guess!’

...it’s no wonder people get frustrated when they look for information on how to properly network with others.

Networking also has a somewhat ‘sleazy’ association to it: people picture the grease-ball haircut on the really loud guy with 800 business cards who’s all talk and no action.

The thing is, good networking does not have to be this way, not at all.

So set aside your bias against networking, and step into ‘natural networking’ for building real relationships with people who can help you get where you want to be.

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The Paper Industry Technical Association (PITA) is an independent organisation which operates for the general benefit of its members – both individual and corporate – dedicated to promoting and improving the technical and scientific knowledge of those working in the UK pulp and paper industry. Formed in 1960, it serves the Industry, both manufacturers and suppliers, by providing a forum for members to meet and network; it organises visits, conferences and training seminars that cover all aspects of papermaking science. It also publishes the prestigious journal *Paper Technology International* and the *PITA Annual Review*, both sent free to members, and a range of other technical publications which include conference proceedings and the acclaimed *Essential Guide to Aqueous Coating*.



Networking Skills that Work

If you've struggled with sincere networking in the past (as I have), definitely give this list a run-through and take notes when you notice an area where you can improve your own networking habits.

As a last bit of advice before we get into the list, be sure to network outside of your industry from time to time!

We often get so focused with business related networking that we never reach out to people who may be doing cool stuff in other fields of work... and you never know what may come of it.

1.) Make Networking a Regular Activity

This is my solution to one of the most common questions about networking: how do I get started?

If you're worried about jumping in to networking or how you can keep it as a habit, just follow this one simple strategy — every other day (or every day, or twice a week, etc.), reach out to one person whose work you find interesting.

That's it!

Don't ask for anything (more on that in a minute), just reach out with an email that shows your mutual respect/interest in what they do, and that you just wanted to say "Hey" to a person doing cool things.

That way, you have no fear of coming off as sleazy/begging, will consistently reach out to new people (not just for a week before you quit), and you'll likely come across a lot of interesting folks in your industry, which is always a plus.

No more excuses!

2.) Stop Being an Internet Panhandler

As a guy who loves studying behavioral psychology, one of the most interesting topics to me is what exactly changes in people's personalities when they interact with others online. Not much has been published on the subject, but the online disinhibition effect is one that we all probably recognize in one way or another.

The point is this: People on the internet tend to lack diplomacy & tact, and one of the ways that this rears its ugly head is that people will ask for things on the internet that they'd never expect someone to give them in "real life."

While most people on the street would be hesitant to ask a stranger for \$10, on the internet people will ask for THE WORLD and then get upset when you don't deliver!

As an example... when I recently wrote a huge article on productivity, I got a lot of good emails after it was published from people who enjoyed it (more on that in a bit).

On the other hand, I got a lot of TERRIBLE intro emails from people essentially demanding that I help them with their productivity problems. One guy even told me that he wanted a "quick" analysis of his productivity problems over an hour long Skype call!

"Sure thing, my time is apparently worth nothing to you so let me drop everything I'm doing and call you up!"

As freelancers, many of us know this feeling all too well, yet a lot of us still suffer from "internet pandhandler syndrome" when trying to network with people. I wrote in my previous post on freelance marketing about how I was able to land features on big publications through email, and I included a single tip that can help you avoid this annoying habit...

Don't ask for anything in the first email!

Genuine networking doesn't start with your hands out during the first contact.



3.) Know Who You're Reaching Out To

This should be a no-brainer, but if you've ever gotten an unsolicited email that felt like a spam message but actually wasn't, you know what I mean here.

The most important thing to remember here is that if you are trying to connect with an **influential** person, this becomes even more important — not because they are inherently more important, but because they probably have people trying to reach out all the time.

You can stand out by doing your homework and actually getting to know some facts about the person you're about to reach out to, beyond the "surface level" stuff that everybody already knows.

People reach out to me a lot of discuss content strategy, and I'm flattered when they bring up some work of mine that they saw on Help Scout, Bidsketch, or any other place I regularly appear.

As basic as that may seem, remember point #2... on the internet, everyone comes across as: *"Blah blah blah enough about you, let's get back to me!"*

Separate yourself from the pack and actually come prepared knowing about the person's passion projects, and I guarantee you'll get remembered.

4.) Use Positive Language

I actually talked about this in my list of customer service skills, and this is true for building proposals (as described in this example eBook about software development proposals), but it goes far beyond dealing with customers — it's great for networking too.

This is especially true when you consider that so much communication today is done via text, and it's hard to display emotions and other subtle cues without the other person's face being in sight.

For instance, compare these two similar requests...

"Hey. I want to do an interview with you on your new project by this Friday, we have very similar audiences."

vs.

"Hey, I'd love it if we could do a quick interview sometime soon on your new project, my audience loves your work."

While "saying" the same thing, you likely immediately realized that #2 was far more inviting and using positive language to get the same message across, but without the bluntness (which can be misinterpreted for rudeness via text) of the first example.

When in doubt about the tone of your message, it is best to keep this rule in mind and evaluate whether or not you are using positive language, there is essentially no downside (just don't be overly chipper or "Whoo hoo!" for every single message) and it is a great way to avoid communication problems that stem from using harsher language.

5.) Cultivate Your "Power" Contacts

As much as many people may not like to hear it, "All contacts are equal, but some are more equal than others."

You're going to come across people who become power contacts as you become more connected with those in your industry. These people will be the ones who are constantly introducing you to new/interesting contacts, referring you to others for more work, and just generally pushing your business forward.

I can name one supernetworker of mine in Leo Widrich, co-founder of the BufferApp.

Although we're both busy, I try to stay in regular contact with Leo, make contributing to the Buffer blog a monthly priority, and constantly make mentions of Leo wherever I post (hint hint).



These are simply the contacts you'll form where the "give and take" has reached a fairly high level, and you're both willing to support the other where possible.

Be sure to keep an eye on these people, networking isn't always Pareto principle in practice, but in many instances your most frequent contacts will be the ones that really matter.

You don't need to know the most people, just the right people.

6.) Learn How to Email

Real business gets done over email.

A tweet may get someone's attention, but when it comes to establishing real relationships, the conversation truly begins when you start the reciprocity via email.

That said, you should know how to write a good email, both during the "outreach" stages of networking and when you've already established a connection.

Let's break some advice down for each stage...

#1 — Outreach

When you're looking to initially get someone's attention, you need to tread carefully.

Here are 3 good pieces of advice for outreach emails:

- **KISS:** Keep it short, stupid. I wrote about this in my guide on How to Email Busy People, but the #1 killer in outreach emails is sending people a book when all they want is a paragraph. You're the one reaching out, so don't waste their time with a wall-o-text, 3 short paragraphs ought to do it.
- **Make it about them:** You can give a quick spiel as to why you're an interesting guy/gal to connect with, but since you're hitting their inbox first, make the first email mostly about them.
- **Find a mutual connection:** This could either be a mutual friend or a mutual interest, but one of the best ways to personalize an outreach email is to find a legitimate thing in common that you and receiving party have.

#2 — Established connections

Once you've established contact, the conversation begins to shift quite a bit (obviously). It's similar to when you make a new friend vs. talking to a friend you've had for 2 years, you're familiarity changes what you talk about.

That said, don't let your good connections go to waste over a bad email.

Here's how you can improve the next stage...

1. **NO CONSTANT PANHANDLING!:** That's right, this is making another appearance. If the only time you contact this person is to get something out of them, you're doing it wrong.
2. **Send them interesting emails:** What should you be emailing them then? Interesting content that they may enjoy, mentions that you've given them, insightful questions or thoughts that appeal to both of your businesses/interests, etc.

Pretty simple right?

Use email to stay in touch with those important people in your networks, staying connected is often much more important than getting connected.

7.) Don't Expect Anything

This "skill" is actually one of the most important of all, because with the right mindset you can usually avoid many of the big networking mistakes out there.

When you are always out to get something, you are not truly networking with people, you're just running a long-term manipulation game.



The RIGHT mindset is to know that creating a big network is the smart thing to do, but also understanding that whatever comes should just come, you don't need to actively be pestering your connections for everything.

It's great when a new connection works out from a professional standpoint, but it's hard to measure some other things that having a large network can bring, like...

1. More information & great conversation with smart people
2. Introductions to others
3. Creating a presence of being "that guy that everybody knows and likes"

Just because a connection doesn't result in more direct dollars in your bank account doesn't mean it was fruitless, and you shouldn't be pursuing connections with people just to wring something out of them.

Speaking of which...

8.) Burn Useless Bridges

Yikes, somewhat of a controversial point to place on a post about networking, no?

The thing is, **this skill is an absolute must to learn.**

Eventually, you're going to come across "leeches," people who you've connected with but don't see the relationship as give-and-take, more like, "*How much can I get out of you?*"

Networking is supposed to help you grow your business by meeting genuinely awesome people, not create a network of vultures who only reach out to you when they need something.

Cut these people off, and fast, you don't need anyone holding you back.

Note that this isn't the same as people who want to help you, but can't and don't ask much from you. This advice is for the greedy, those hitting your inbox with favour after favour that never gets returned.