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Don't Make This Common Networking Mistake

by Neil Courtis and Steve Dalton September 9, 2024

Summary

When it comes to job searches, everybody knows how important networking is. But a surprising number of people fail to follow up with the people they've met with and sought advice from. That's a problem, because it can alienate mentors and hold job seekers back. The authors discuss the main reasons for this lack of follow-up and then recommend a simple three-part plan for following up effectively.

Much has been written about the benefits of networking when you're looking for a job.

The problem is, you're unlikely to receive any of those benefits if you don't follow up after the meetings you've requested — and that's a surprisingly common failing. Recently, before a webinar for more than 1,000 alumni of European business schools and universities, we asked how often our participants had received follow up from networkers with whom they'd met — and we learned that more than half of them had never heard a thing.

Why aren't networkers following up? Two pieces of conventional advice may be getting in the way.

The first is that in conveying thanks for a networking meeting, you need to do something remarkable (Write a note by hand! Include a gift!) or engage in emotional gymnastics (Convey sincere and heartfelt thoughts!). Clearly, this kind of advice can help, but often it leads to inaction, because it sets the bar so high.

The second is that you should reciprocate for the good turns you've received (Perhaps share an interesting article? Or offer to make some professional introductions yourself?). Reciprocity is a powerful driver in building relationships, of course, but it can be hard when you're looking for a job because the people you're likely to reach out to for advice will usually be more senior and thus hard for you to help.

So how can you follow up on networking meetings in a way that is achievable and effective?

To help answer this question, we asked our webinar participants to share their best and worst experiences of engaging with networkers, and in response we received more than 170 responses.

On the "bad" side of the ledger, many participants described hearing nothing at all. Some made references to being ghosted or ignored, and one even had this to say: "No

follow-up at all, even after meeting almost 2 hours and sharing my own network.” The message is clear: Silence will not serve you well.

Presumably, if the conventional advice were correct, on the “good” side of the ledger our respondents would have given us lots of feedback about handwritten notes, thoughtful gifts, and poetic expressions of gratitude. Not so much. Only two people referred to gifts (“I was sent a box of brownies!”), and only one mentioned the emotional content of the thank-you message they were sent (“very heartfelt”).

What about reciprocity? Well, 18% of the responses we received did talk about reciprocity, collaboration, or ongoing friendship. But this wasn’t the top answer category, and in fact didn’t even make the top three.

How to Do It Right

So what constitutes a great follow-up?

The top three answers we received from our respondents were these: Hearing that their advice had positively impacted the person who had reached out (43%); being thanked (23%); and hearing that their advice had been followed (22%). Many respondents mentioned how powerful it was to get repeat updates from someone they had advised. As one put it, “They kept in touch and kept me updated on their career journey, often reminding me that I am the reason for their rise ... I was obviously stunned and happy.”

If you’re surprised by how altruistic these respondents sound, you shouldn’t be — the people who agree to your outreach as a networker are almost by definition altruistic. But among those altruists you’ll discover two different types. As one of us (Steve) has written, in [*The 2-Hour Job Search*](#), some are purely altruistic (“Boosters”), while others are motivated by a sense of obligation (“Obligates”). Boosters make up only a small segment of the population (maybe 10-20%), but because they’re so willing to meet and help you in your networking, they’re the ones you’ll mainly be meeting with, and they’ll provide almost all of the practical guidance you get. Obligates, on the other hand, tend to create work for you (for instance, by repeatedly rescheduling meetings) more often than they help. They’d rather not get involved but also don’t want to lose face. So how do you delight the Boosters you meet (and placate Obligates)? By engaging in a practice that Steve has called the *three-part thank you* (3TY). The practice, which is based on lessons learned during the coaching of thousands of job-hunting MBA students, consists of the following elements:

Express gratitude for the subject’s time and insights.

This is straightforward. It can involve saying something as simple as “Thank you again for your time and insight yesterday.” A timely, gracious expression of thanks means a lot.

Highlight the insight or advice that you found most interesting.

The point here is to get specific, which lets the subject know that you were genuinely interested in what you both talked about. It also allows you to flatter the subject in an authentic way. Furthermore, whatever you highlight can then serve as the basis for

homework you assign yourself prior to your next contact with this person — and in fact can serve as the reason for that follow-up. “My favorite piece of advice,” you might say, “was when you suggested that I check out *Ad Age* and *Brand Week* to get more up to speed on CPG-related marketing topics and terms.” This approach has an additional benefit: Once you’ve followed through on that advice, you’ll have a good reason to reach back out to provide an update.

Humbly ask if you can return with additional questions later in your job search.

People who do this nearly always get an affirmative response, and in doing so they activate a “commitment and consistency” response, as described by the psychologist Robert Cialdini in *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. Cialdini found that if you get someone to verbally agree to take a particular action in the future, you’ll increase the likelihood that they will indeed take that action. In this case, what you’re hoping for is a response to a follow-up email you’ll send later.

When you send your first 3TY email, we recommend you put a reminder in your calendar to send your follow-up email. In that message, follow the same 3TY format, but with a twist — after you remind the subject of your favorite takeaway from your original meeting, describe what benefit you’ve derived from following that advice or acting upon that insight. Something like this: “Reading *Ad Age* has made me far more conversant in marketing topics, language, and trends.” Letting some time pass and then reiterating your gratitude, along with a description of how you’ve been helped by the advice you received, builds significant trust with your contact and establishes you as the kind of responsive and proactive mentee who is fun and rewarding to work with. Even Obligates can be swayed by this tiny act of follow-through.

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Gratitude doesn’t need to take a long time or require dramatic gestures. Consider it a starting point rather than an end point in a relationship. The next steps are entirely within your power. Instead of freezing up at the thought of writing a thank-you note or forgetting your advocates as soon as you hit Send, play the long game. Fill in the blanks of a 3TY, set a reminder for next month, and watch how your network will marvel at your conscientiousness.

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