



The Care & Feeding of Your Network

A manifesto that will make you popular, happy, wealthy and the life of the party. Or at least will help you get what you need without begging.

by Bob Allard and Richard Banfield

Network: (n) a group of people that are all well-known by a person

Network: (v) helping people that you know get what they need and want, so that they will feel compelled to reciprocate.

A network is a living organism. It needs to be fed, and will not be healthy if its diet is mostly junk food. Business cards from a conference, lists of alumni from your college, and people that you meet on any number of social networking sites are the junk food of networking. It is very hard to grow a healthy, vibrant network if you feed it these.

So, what do you do? How do you feed your network so that it is healthy, vibrant and happy? How do you get 100, 200, 500 people thinking about how they can help YOU with your project, your passion, your school, your business?

You feed your network CONNECTIONS. Introductions that are thoughtful, creative and very useful will make your network a powerful extension of you, and will create enormous leverage for everything.

Be Authentic

You can't fake caring. You actually have to care.
(Sociopaths need not apply.)

This may seem simplistic, or even insulting, but I am very serious, and it really makes a difference. Only sociopaths can fake sincerity well, so unless you are a sociopath, you will not be a good networker unless you figure out that it matters to actually care about the success of the people that you meet, and the people in your network.

Reap what you sow

The Golden Rule, yadda, yadda.

OK, so we've all been to some version of Sunday School, or seen an example of it on TV. The idea is so screamingly obvious that I hate to even bring it up. But here goes: people will help you if you've helped them first.

Not all of them, not right away, not on your timeline, not exactly when you think you need it, but it WILL happen. EVERY successful person will admit in a quiet moment at the end of their illustrious career that they never would have made it if it hadn't been for the small effort of a few people who helped them along the way. Uncle Jim set up an interview with his college roommate who needed an accountant. Joe, your neighbor, had a cousin on the selection committee of the school, and he put in a good word. Etc.

It all begins with YOU. Say "UNCLE!"

Networking is Not Selling

Huh?

To network is to build a high-performing team whose members all look out for one another and each other's networks. Networking is giving. Those in your network will let you know when it's OK to sell to them, in fact, they'll be happy to have you work with them!

Networking is not "networking"

Huh??

The "average" networkers are making the critical error of only looking out for themselves. That's because they approach networking like they would approach building a house: treating it like it's a task. If you're building a house you need to gather a group of talented people around you: a contractor, an architect and a dozen sub-contractors to get your stuff done. Building a network is completely not like that. It's not about collecting people around you to get your stuff done. People get confused because they think the best network they can have is full of people who can get them things. This is also true of salespeople who think that networking translates into a numbers game. The more names, business cards or links they can collect the greater they believe their network will be.

Five steps to greatness in Networking

- 1 **Know what he/she is working on.** You have to ask, “So, what are you working on?” (Not, “What do you do?”, or “Would you like to see these really nice steak knives?”)
- 2 **Think creatively about how to help.** There are different ways your network can help someone with their project (whether finding a new car, a new career, or some new way to apply epoxy to titanium). Within your small network, you know all sorts of people: relatives, classmates, associates from work, neighbors, guys on your softball team. The more you care about what they do and know, the more useful you will be at introducing them to your network.
- 3 **Make a meaningful introduction.** This is the hard part, but relax! It will get MUCH easier the more you do it, and it feels good when you make a great introduction! Think about the 100 people you know, and then focus on the 1,2 or 3 people that could be helpful to the person in front of you. Ideally, the person you introduce them to will also receive some sort of “win” from the introduction, but this is not critical at first. (That is an advanced skill.)
- 4 **FOLLOW UP.** Just like sales, this is a greatly underutilized step, and one that has tremendous potential. Calling up a friend to see if they’ve heard from an introduction you’ve made is a great reason to give someone a call. And it is part of the TRAINING process.
- 5 **Keep your network informed about what YOU are working on.** This is NOT selling, and does not even feel like selling. Remember, you’ve already asked them what they are working on, you’ve introduced them to people that could help them, you’ve followed up with them in a few weeks. You’ve proven, with real, tangible activity, that you CARE about them and their needs. You feel their pain.

Help your Introverted Friends

Half of us are chronically shy—but they are the ones who know how to do all of the really hard stuff...

The trouble with only networking with those other people who network, is that half the world is not going to be at the conference and chatting you up. These people are not impressed by the 2,100 links that you have on LinkedIn, or the 3,254 contacts that are in your Palm Pilot(s). They are too busy solving the complex problems that get them excited.

This poses a problem: if half of the WORLD doesn't network, how do we include them in our network?

The answer is simple—introduce them to people who can help them get their project done, and they are now “networking”. Amazingly, engineering, art and other career havens for introverted people are chock-a-block FULL of people that you have to know to get anything done.

Lather, Rinse, Repeat

THIS IS NOT A TRICK. IT TAKES PRACTICE.

There are no shortcuts here, other than caring more and being more creative about who can help who, how, where and when. Timing, luck, serendipity, coincidence, karma, whatever you'd like to call it, it happens more when your network is all pulling in the same direction.

It is like riding a bike, cooking, playing the piano, golf (ok, not golf. Golf is much harder). The more you do it, the more you explore your network for new interests, skills, projects, visions, the more you will be able to bring VALUE to it, and the more it will VALUE YOU!

The Big Picture

THIS IS BIGGER THAN YOU, AND YOUR JOB SEARCH.

OK, I've got to tell you the truth... I've got bigger fish to fry. The world is in desperate need of people who actually care about getting stuff done. I mean the real stuff. Poverty, AIDS, illiteracy, violence, depression, drug addiction. Lots of people need lots of help. We all need to care more about others, and this manifesto is a sneaky, subversive way to get people out of their own stupid, quarterly profit, sales pipeline, Monsterboard/LinkedIn/Ryze, startup-crazed lifecycle and into the "what can I do for you?" mode that will allow our rapidly-shrinking, complicated-as-hell world to MAYBE survive another few centuries.

So, I ask you:

"What are you working on?"

"What can I do to help?"

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bob Allard is an entrepreneur, musician and philosopher with a talent for successfully bringing people and ideas together. He has founded and assisted many successful companies on his own and through his company, ExtensionEngine, a software development center based in Split, Croatia that focuses on mobile and database application development.

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