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Connecting ... The Forgotten Art of Social Interaction

By Randy Hain, Managing Partner of Bell Oaks

First and foremost, this is not another article on networking, speed meeting or business card collecting. So many of us have been inundated by countless tips on how to meet people and exchange business cards. I'm talking about the often-overlooked, elemental skill you need before you can form a true relationship or become adept at productive and meaningful networking ... the forgotten art of *connecting*.

Picture yourself approaching someone in a room full of people. You don't know anything about him or her other than possibly their name (from a name tag) or where they work. You introduce yourself and then ... what? Does a connection occur that leads to a professional relationship or perhaps friendship, or do you make polite surface conversation and move on to the next stale encounter? How can you seize that moment and imbue it with purpose and meaning?

I saw this recently as the service offering from a business speed networking company: "Computer-engineered meeting itineraries based on precise personal preferences. [They] uniquely compress the impact of multiple wining and dining gatherings into just a few premium-quality hours." I have to think something is missing here! Among other things, it should be about quality, not quantity.

The foundation for successful networking and relationship building is making a meaningful connection—that initial contact with someone rooted in mutual interest or experience that breaks down the proverbial wall that exists between us. These connections should emanate from your genuine desire to learn about the other person and determine what you have in common.

Consider this perspective from Jacqui Welch, Vice President of Human Resources for Rock-Tenn Company, "*In order to connect meaningfully with other people, you have to first connect with yourself. Meaningful connection is an outflow or by-product of understanding who you are, who you are becoming and what you literally and figuratively bring to the table.*"

In my experience, these points seem to resonate the most when making a connection: 1) be open and a little vulnerable, 2) be secure in who you are, 3) be confident that you have something to offer, 4) don't fake it ... authenticity rules. Cutting through the veneer of cursory behavior and building a bridge to the person you just met can open countless personal and professional doors. It also helps us overcome the innate social awkwardness that is common with new encounters.

Branden Lisi, a Principal with Object 9 Consulting (www.object9.com) recently shared this perspective: *Before you walk into that room full of strangers, be clear about what you want to accomplish as well as the value you have to offer as a human being (not as a corporation). Remember that "working a room" is not about talking, it's about listening. It's about learning what you don't know, not sharing what you do. If you start with a clear, succinct message about yourself which can be delivered in one or two sentences you can spend the bulk of your time and energy asking questions that grow conversations—and long-term relationships.*

WWW.BELLOAKS.COM

O 678.287.2000 F 678.287.2001

One Glenlake Parkway Suite 1000 Atlanta, Georgia 30328

It's no surprise that the plethora of social networking sites across the Internet boast members in the tens of millions. These virtual "relationships" negate our natural tendencies to shy away from situations that are perhaps a bit out of our control ... such as starting a face-to-face conversation with someone you've never met. But it's important that we don't overlook the human aspect of building a business relationship.

Karen Glatzer, President and Founder of GH Consulting says, "*Career-building is not just about who you know, it is how you nurture those relationships at all times and not just when you need or want something. My counsel to other women regardless of where they are in their life and careers is to find a group of men and women with whom you can build a deep, collegial rapport. It can be based on such things as life philosophy, spirituality, family values, personal growth, sense of humor, and sharing of self. Then it is easy for the professional support to occur.*"

Consider these suggestions on connecting with others before your next meeting:

1. Be a Great Listener

This is critical and the building block for a new relationship. Veronica Sheehan, SVP of Network Operations for Turner Entertainment Group says, "*An important part of making good connections is mastering the art of listening. A good listener learns and truly understands what motivates and inspires another person. If you offer to help that person without an expectation of getting something in return, your authentic self shines through and gives you the advantage that a favor may be returned.*"

2. Ask Questions

It is a fact that others find you more interesting when you ask questions. The real purpose here is to learn as much as possible and determine commonality. Show a genuine interest in the other person through your questions and a bridge of trust will be built more quickly.

3. Get Personal

Conversations are human interactions, so don't be afraid to share personal information. It allows your compassion to reveal itself. Family, faith, values, and outlook on life ... these are all worthy points of connection. Be sure to pay close attention to the reaction of your audience—many people who are more accustomed to surface conversations may be initially sensitive to engagement at this level.

4. Compare Interests

One of the simplest connecting points is shared interests. An obvious example—the event or setting where you meet a person is by definition a shared interest. Asking specific questions with this in mind will uncover relevant information and provide you with something relevant to discuss.

5. Share History

Where did you go to school? Where were you born? How old are your children? How long have you lived in Atlanta? How long have you worked for ABC company? How long have you been married? Where did you meet your husband or wife? This is not simple data. These are points of connection where you can find something in common with almost anyone.

6. Use Humor

One of the easiest ways to break the ice with someone is to make them laugh. The ability to poke fun at yourself or make light of a situation can help you build an instant bond with someone you don't know, but generally know that jokes and humor are two very different things ... jokes don't work!

7. Connect Through Technology

It sounds contradictory to think of technology as a way to build personal connections, but that is the world in which we live. Business networking sites such as LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) and Ryze (www.ryze.com) allow you to view a person's career history and personal information such as education, community involvement, and

hobbies. They are useful tools in which to learn about someone you are meeting and bring to light things you have in common. But as useful as these sites are to find connecting points, they should remain simply a vehicle that facilitates face-to-face interaction.

8. Connect Through Content

Someone mentions a topic of interest and you recall reading a great article on that very subject. Why not email them the article ... or better yet, mail it with a personal, handwritten note? Another person is struggling with a work-related problem or professional development challenge. Why not give them a book you've read that may address their challenge? Or email a review of the book from Amazon with your recommendation. Actions such as these show that you aren't just listening but taking a genuine interest in what they have to say. It also creates a follow-up opportunity and something to discuss the next time you get together.

9. Share Faith & Values

You must determine your comfort level with this one, but it can be a powerful way to connect. Sharing your values and engaging in a conversation about someone else's will often generate a deep, authentic discussion that evolves into a strong relationship. This "values dialogue" can lead to discussions about faith which for many people is welcome and comfortable. However, for some it can be awkward, so again consider your audience carefully.

10. Invest Selflessly

This can be the most challenging tip of all: offer to help the person you are speaking to without an expectation of return. Think about it. One of the quickest ways to break down barriers and establish a connection is to offer assistance to someone in need. Use your contacts, relationships, experiences or anything else in your repository to help. You will make an immediate connection and build what may become a mutually-beneficial relationship. To be sure, not everyone reciprocates, but most people will respond positively to your kind offer ... then the magic happens.

While the premise of this article is building connections in a business-focused setting, by no means is that the only avenue to consider. Any place we frequent or gather for social interaction can be a place to make a connection—sports teams, church, school groups, playgroups, parties, happy hour, etc. are all valuable opportunities. Consider the tips in this article the next time you encounter someone you don't know and see if you can build a connection. Many positive outcomes will flow from your effort.

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Randy Hain is Managing Partner at Bell Oaks Executive Search, a 37-year-old executive search firm based in Atlanta (www.belloaks.com). He may be reached at rhain@belloaks.com or (678) 287-2031.