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Leveraging Your Network: What to Do with All Those Business Cards

By Mary-Christine (M.C.) Sungaila

I used to go to bar association or charity events and dutifully exchange cards. If I did not immediately have a reason to contact the person, however, the card would not go far. I would find the card lining the bottom of a purse, sometimes months later when I pulled the purse out to use it again. Something had to be done. I needed a system for capturing those stray cards and following up with folks I met. Here is the system I came up with, which I hope provides inspiration for others.

Have a simple method for gathering and tracking contact information, and follow it every time you return from an event. Craig Brown, my business development coach, helped me develop a system for organizing contacts. In a regular Microsoft Word document, I have a table that lists each individual's contact information. There are separate columns to mark the organization or event where I first met the person, the date, and a personal notes column for such things as their children's names or other interests or organizations we have in common. The chart also includes a series of checklist columns for each month of the year.

When I go to an event, at the end of the evening I write on the back of each card pertinent facts about each person and notes about any particular item I said I would follow up with them on (such as sending them information about an upcoming seminar, event, or article of interest). When I have a critical mass of cards, I pass them on to a member of our administrative team, who adds the information to the appropriate columns in the contact listing. If any contact information needs to be revised or updated, I email the revised information to our team, and they update the list accordingly.

Every two months, or whenever I have an event I would like to invite someone to, I scroll through the list. If I do not have a check mark next to someone's name on the calendar portion of the chart for the past few months, I brainstorm whether there is a good and timely reason to contact that

person. If I have an event, I look for someone who has similar interests (set forth in the notes column) and make a list of potential invitees. My goal is not to allow the contacts to become stagnant, or just a name on a list.

Contact people on your list on a regular basis in a way that is tailored to their unique interests or your particular connection. To maintain fresh contacts and to facilitate business relationships, you need to keep in touch with people. It is important, however, that you do so in a way that says “You are important to me and not just another connection.” I always remember when I receive impersonal notes from people I met at functions—generic letters or emails that clearly went to everyone they met. When I receive these, I am not encouraged to maintain contact.

Therefore, whenever I choose to follow up with someone, I try to respond to his or her particular interests. If I send a note after an event, I mention particular items the recipient and I discussed and events we talked about going to together in the future. Even if I see that I have not contacted someone in several months, I do not call them just because I have not done so in awhile. I keep their name in the back of my mind and wait until there is a good reason to contact them. The contact list is just a tool to remind me of everyone I know, and to nudge me to provide opportunities to everyone, whether I have seen them recently or not.

Approach your contacts with the attitude of “What can I provide for them?” rather than “What can they give me?” The most deadly attitude for developing a network or maintaining business relationships is “What can you do for me?” These are the people who prowl bar association events completely focused on people’s nametags and talking only to those who seem to be in a position to help them. People respond better, and more naturally, to sincere generosity.

When I am at an event, I have a service mentality. I think about connections I know that might help the person I am talking to, and I have the same attitude with people who end up on my contact list. I introduce people on my list to each other if their practices seem compatible. I send along publication, membership, or seminar opportunities to those who might enjoy or appreciate them. Whenever I contact people, I think about what I can do to help them. When I inevitably ask for help, they are much more inclined to provide it because it is clear that I am not a “taker” and the relationship is reciprocal.

Keywords: networking, business development, rainmaking, organizing contacts, business cards, professional development

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Comments

- March 3, 2010 – Thank you for the helpful tips. As the Asst. Director for the Office of Career Planning at Univ of San Francisco School of Law, I am in charge of Employer Relations which requires constant networking. My system for keeping track is similar to yours - immediately making notes on the business cards themselves re: the person, the event and our conversation.

Then within the week, if not the next day, I will send out a LinkedIn request to connect and keep in touch via that Social Media platform. Most people I meet are on LinkedIn and if they are not, we agree to keep in touch via email. LinkedIn has a feature where you can keep notes on each connection you make. This is where I input the information from the business card. Additionally, LinkedIn automatically organizes your contacts by categories. You can create your own category in addition to the defaults provided.

Your LinkedIn contacts can also be exported to a different medium, such as an Excel spreadsheet or into Outlook. This eliminates having to create your own spreadsheet and re-typing.

One of the benefits of having your connections online is that it comes with you where ever you go. I've had former colleagues who have been laid off with little notice who were unable to download their Outlook contacts and by using LinkedIn, you can avoid such a situation.

Best regards, Marina Sarmiento Feehan

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