

Conscious Careering



Portraits from the front; the right and wrong ways to network in search of a new position!

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Ask me to share some thoughts about the meaning of life, how to beat the stock market, or what it takes to attract the opposite sex, and you'll find me at a profound loss for words. Ask me for an opinion about the proper way to conduct job search networking, however, and you'd better fasten your seatbelt—it will be hard to shut me up once I get going!

As a career coach and columnist, who has witnessed the profound impact effective networking has on success within the career arena, I've become something of an evangelist on the topic. Not being particular adept in this area myself, by nature, I've spent over 14 years observing dozens of world-class networkers who have crossed my path, and have done my best to soak up their collective wisdom and pass it along to the clients who have placed themselves in my care.

Given that there are hundreds of books already available, however, which are pumped full of timely networking tips and suggestions, I'm going to devote this column to more of a "show rather than tell" format. In general, I've found real-life examples more useful in educating people about these types of issues and in generating breakthrough insights. It's one thing to discuss job hunting and career success from an abstract theoretical standpoint, but people seem to grasp the lessons even faster when provided with specific stories, examples, and case studies that demonstrate certain success concepts relevant to the networking and re-employment challenge.

So today, I'm going to set the soapbox aside and focus instead on simply telling the story of two job seekers I've had the privilege of meeting over the years—and the unique approach each one took to the networking process.

● The story of Bill.

Bill's story begins several years ago, at a local professional association event which I attended in the Seattle area. This particular event was centered around various human resource trends unfolding in the high-tech industry, and most of the attendees were either HR professionals, themselves, or service vendors like myself who were there to gather information and possibly

make a few new contacts from a business development standpoint.

There was a third category of people in attendance that day, however. Like many professional events in today's world, the meeting had attracted a large contingent of unemployed workers hoping to rub elbows with potential hiring managers and recruiters.

It was one of these attendees, in particular, who caught my eye. "Bill" was an unemployed technical writing professional who had shown up at the meeting hoping to connect with somebody, anybody who might be in a position to hire him. Dressed in a rumpled white shirt and a necktie that hadn't been in style since the Ford presidency, it was obvious that Bill had psyched himself up with a few career advice books—or had been ordered by a well-meaning career counselor to get out in the community and network, network, network.

You could tell, however, that Bill was scared to death by the process. Undoubtedly, he was here at the meeting as a last resort, having tried Internet job boards, extreme resume makeovers, and every other trick in the book to find work without having to get out of his comfort zone. Now, however, out of desperation, he was going to actually try his hand at networking with complete strangers—an excruciatingly difficult exercise for those of us, including myself, who lean to the introverted side of the house. And the sheer guts Bill displayed in doing this earned him my eternal empathy and admiration, even if his technique turned out to leave quite a bit to be desired.

So at any rate, here Bill was, bound and determined to introduce himself to everybody in the room or to die trying. I sat back and watched, unobtrusively, as he wandered around the room greeting each person in attendance and reciting a canned script about his skill sets, background, and career goals. He'd shake one person's hand, his monotone networking pitch would come out, and then he'd move on to the next person down the line. If memory serves, the Reader's Digest version of his message boiled down to something like: "Hi, I'm Bill. I'm a technical writing professional currently looking for a new job. I really need to find something. Do you know of any people or companies in the area who might want to hire me?"

Unfortunately, this gutsy individual could have shaken half of the hands in America and still not be any closer to the big break he was searching for. It was obvious that he was viewing networking as a tedious chore, and was assuming that through sheer repetition, and perseverance, his networking efforts were logically bound to bear fruit. Instead of showing a genuine interest in making connections with people, and an understanding of what real relationships are all about, Bill was bulldozing his way through the process. I had a friend who got involved with Amway once, and I saw this same mentality take hold. It wasn't pretty!

As time went by, and the social segment of the meeting continued, it was clear that Bill was becoming something of a notorious figure and was coming across to everybody in the room as forward, self-centered, and desperate. The furtive glances and body language of my fellow attendees made this abundantly clear. In fact, I witnessed at least several people intentionally get up from the table when he got near in order to avoid the awkward exchange.

As for myself, I avoided the temptation to bolt with the herd and made a deliberate point to shake Bill's hand and hear him out. Alas, as I suspected, he didn't ask a single question about me, or my background, and recited the same pitch I'd heard at least a dozen times as he'd made his way around the room. All I could do was respond politely with a few hollow words of encouragement and wish him the best of luck in finding the type of job he was looking for.

Eventually, I lost track of Bill as he worked his way down the reception line. All I'm left with is the picture of a lonely soul, in a brown-and-red-striped tie, sacrificing himself in vain to a two-hour nightmarish networking ordeal that most likely prolonged his job search, instead of shortening it. I sincerely hope that he ended up landing on his feet—and eventually found a company that could put his writing and editing skills to profitable use.

● **The story of Debra.**

For every couple of "Bills" out there in the job hunting world, however, you'll also find the occasional "Debra" who networks instinctively, appropriately, and with striking success.

Debra was a recent client of mine who represents the rarest type of individual that I encounter in my practice; a person who has almost everything going for them, and could get a new job in a heartbeat, but who has the foresight to seek out a coach who might be able to provide the guidance needed to help open up even greater avenues of career success.

Balanced on that subtle knife-edge between confidence and humility, Debra was possessed of an uncommon self-awareness, and it was instantly clear that she was going to be a great client to work with. Throughout our first meeting, she listened intently, took notes (a universal sign of respect), and was keenly committed to not exceeding the one-hour time limit we'd agreed upon for our session.

These meetings, themselves, were highly productive and enjoyable. We accomplished a great deal and Debra repeatedly commented on her satisfaction with each appointment and the work we were doing together. And yet, like clockwork, she'd still find the time to mail me a crisp, well-written thank you note the next day expressing her sincere appreciation for the coaching I'd given her. On one occasion, in fact, she even mailed me a gift-wrapped mug from Tully's coffee as an expression of gratitude. Now this gift alone would have been a nice touch, but what made it a gesture of epic proportions was

that it symbolized two observations she'd made during our time together—first, that I often drank my coffee from the clumsy little Styrofoam cups provided by my office suite, and second, that Tully's was my local roaster of choice and also a corporate account of my firm.

Sycophantic, you say? Unnecessary gestures, given the fact that she was already paying money to receive my professional assistance?

If these are your immediate reactions, then I'm here to break some news to you: your networking and career management instincts may be due for an overhaul.

Now don't get me wrong. I was surprised, too, by Debra's thoughtfulness and largesse. I certainly do not receive these types of gifts from clients on a regular basis, nor do I expect them, being a professional service provider. But these gestures utterly convinced me of one thing—that I could refer Debra to anybody in my network without the slightest hesitation. I knew that she would not only make a great impression on anyone I put her in touch with, and that this would reflect favorably back in my direction, but also that she would also treat each of my carefully-cultivated relationships with respect, appreciation, and professionalism. That's the key. This is the level of trust that has to be earned if you truly want people to open up their Rolodex and share referral contacts with you, whether in a job search setting, marketing your own business, or in any other relevant avenue of life.

In the end, for the price of a \$20 coffee mug, Debra's networking savvy paid off and she won me over as one of her most enthusiastic supporters. I consistently went the extra mile to promote her skills, far and wide, and set her up with a half-dozen informational interviews involving some of my oldest and best business contacts. In less than a month, she had multiple job offers on the table and a great new opportunity in the event planning field. And, as one might guess, her successful transition was quickly followed with an e-mail sent out to all of the people along the way, including myself, who had assisted her in her transition, trumpeting her appreciation and announcing her eagerness to return the favor at some future date.

So there you have it. Bill and Debra, two living, breathing examples of life on the professional networking circuit. These two stories should tell you 99% of what you need to know about networking—we'll save the itemized list of tips and tricks for a future column.

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