

So, You Want to Start a Business?

Written by Jamie Wolf

Tuesday, 28 January 2014 14:24



The Humanity of It All!

Network Authentically – Part 1 of 6

"Beginning today, treat everyone you meet, friend or foe, loved one or stranger, as if they were going to be dead at midnight. Extend to each person, no matter how trivial the contact, all the care and kindness and understanding and love that you can muster, and do it with no thought of any reward. Your life will never be the same again." - Og Mandino

What does it mean to you when someone says 'networking'? How often have you heard that you should network? What image did that conjure up for you? For me, networking often had negative connotations. I thought it gave people an unfair advantage. Rather than getting into school or getting a job on my own merits, I was supposed to curry favor with someone, pull some strings, and jump to the head of the line unfairly. I rejected the notion. I wanted to claim I got there, wherever there was, all by myself. Networking, in my ignorance, also implied using people. When someone told me I should network, I thought it meant getting to know people under false pretenses just for the sake of getting something from them. That felt dirty to me so I loftily refused to participate.

Before I started my first company I worked for a man who was a master at networking. He went to cocktail parties and meetings at the Legislature, he met with CEOs of hospitals and schools, and he was always on the phone with one business owner or another. I never understood why he invested so much time keeping in constant touch with people. I also thought I could never do what he did. He was the boss, after all, and he was a man. Further, I didn't fully understand what he was doing or why and yet felt it was a world open only to him because of his senior position. Most limiting, however, was the fact I wasn't even very curious; I just accepted that it was something he did and therefore never considered asking him to mentor me or take me with him and introduce me to his network.

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However, when I turned my desire to help my daughter into a company, I started networking in earnest without being aware of it. I cared a lot about what I was doing and I was out to make a difference. If that meant asking for help I didn't hesitate. It wasn't really for me - it was for the patients who would be helped by my company's product and service. I talked to anyone who would listen – manufacturers, regulators, researchers, small business people, and people with big titles.

Focusing on my larger purpose removed much of the fear, intimidation, and repulsion I felt about networking. I was doing it out of necessity, not out of the intent to make contacts. Regardless of how I saw it, I realized one day that I had put together a really big Rolodex.

Later, when I started over in Georgia - when I knew not one single soul - I started networking deliberately and with a purpose. That's when I realized how simple it is to gain access to people. I also recognized how few people truly understand how easy it is because only a handful of people show up again and again; it is those people who end up privy to decision-making and who influence outcomes. It doesn't matter if it's the local school board, chamber of commerce, church group, non-profit board, or for-profit board. Once you demonstrate that you will participate, doors open.

If you are new to networking and you fear it the way you might fear public speaking, think of it as a game. This game is not about you. It's about connection. Remember playing a game called Concentration? You turn over cards, real or virtual, two at a time, and try to remember where you last saw the other half of the pair. Networking is similar.

You ask people to tell you about themselves. But rather than mentally preparing your own answer to the same question, you listen. When you meet the next person and the next, you begin to associate one person with another according to their interests or their needs and you introduce them to each other. You remember who has a daughter who just got her braces off and loved her orthodontist and who has a son just getting ready to get braces and needs an orthodontist. You remember who just moved to town and is looking for a good golf course that's reasonably priced and you pair him with someone looking for a 4th this weekend. When you introduce these people to each other, they're happy to share information.

Networking is not directly about work. You don't network initially with the intention of finding a job or making a sale. You go (online or to an event) to build relationships. You try to put other people at ease who probably feel as uncomfortable with networking as you once did. You go with the intention to serve and be helpful. When you establish trust and credibility people are likely to offer assistance before you ask for it. This is true whether you are networking virtually through social media or in person.

Meanwhile, if you've gotten in the habit of judging yourself before someone else can, you may worry that others will find you uninteresting or dismiss you as unaccomplished. You're disqualifying yourself before someone else has a chance to do so, probably because you recall an awkward moment from the past and you don't want to feel that pain and humiliation again. You are preempting the embarrassment by not testing your self-confidence. To contradict your harsh self-judgment and put your fragile ego in its place, ask yourself a question - are you a person? The answer is yes.

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Therefore, like all people, you have a story. Therefore you have something to offer. Period.

What if you are unemployed and the dreaded question comes up, "What do you do?" (And it will. It's inevitable.) Well, you are the CEO of you. If you're afraid of this question, make plans for a more compassionate introduction that doesn't involve a title. Make a list of things to talk about: hobbies, skills, past experiences, even things you're looking forward to doing in the future. There is no harm in saying you are between jobs. There is no harm in saying you've chosen not to have a job and have chosen instead to start over with a startup. People tend to define who they are solely by what they do. But you don't have to. You are so much more!

You can learn to attend business events where you don't know anybody, to put on a nametag, and to introduce yourself person by person. Ask what they do and probe a bit to see how you can help them, following up as needed. It is as productive to network online, choosing social groups with similar interests. (I look for groups focused on health, business, self-development, nutrition, marketing, and writing.) Look for people whose hearts, passion, curiosity, and drive align with your own. Whether virtual or in person, networking is first and foremost about listening, establishing trust, offering value, and being of service.

Best of all, networking, like this special holiday season, can remind us of our connectedness. Remember, as you 'extend to each person, no matter how trivial the contact, all the care and kindness and understanding and love that you can muster,' to include yourself in that equation. When you move through each moment of your day treating others as you would yourself, and you do so in an authentic and compassionate manner, your life and the lives around you will never be the same again.

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