

2011/05: Work Your Network – Part 2

Since I published the first part of this article, I've spoken to several student groups on the topic of networking. This essential career-building skill is not one that educators often have time to fit into their already over-stuffed programs, and I've found that students are starving for some guidance on how to get started. Establishing a comfort level with networking only comes from practice, and as you can see by scanning the P&C Calendar, many excellent networking venues are coming up fast. Therefore, I'm passing along a few more achievable tips to help you develop relationships that will lead to new opportunities. Be sure to take a moment to peruse PART 1, though, or you're going to be a little lost because we're going to dive right in…

• | What additional tools do you need before you begin? Now that you have your business cards ready to go, you need a little self-confidence and some achievable goals.

Self-Confidence:

A good friend and mentor gave me some fantastic advice many years ago: FAKE IT TILL YOU MAKE IT. Do you really think that everyone has loads of confidence to spare? No. Then how does the world function day in and day out? People brace for the unknown, suck it up and get out there. You are no different. Just be genuine and sincere, and you'll be fine. It sounds touchy-feely, but it's true.

Goals: Set a goal of meeting a certain number of new people at an event and hold yourself to it. If you are already outgoing, make it five people. If you aren't, start with just one. Baby steps are OK.

Now don't kid yourself – “meeting someone” doesn't mean just saying “hi” and walking away as quickly as possible. Introduce yourself, explain why you're attending the event, ask a question, etc. If the person is not receptive or unpleasant, then move on – they have their own hang-ups, and you don't have time for them because you've got your own to deal with.

If you get through the event in one piece – and you will – reward yourself by watching your favorite movie or treating yourself to a spa treatment, nice meal out or concert tickets. Don't go overboard, though. We don't want anyone blaming us for racking up a load of credit card debt because he/she met 10 new people in one night.

• | Where do you even start? You've got your cards, your confidence (real or fake) and your goals… Now where to go?

The obvious choices are places where designers and like-minded people hang out, namely professional meetings, industry parties and educational events, and local and national conferences.

If you're in an urban area, search out an ASID, IIDA, NAHB, NEWH, NKBA, USGBC meeting or any of these professional organizations. Think you're not welcome? Think again. Those who have been in the industry for a while can get a little jaded, and talking to students about their journey from student to professional gets them a bit nostalgic and reminds them why they got into the industry in the first place. Plus, a student's optimism and enthusiasm is like a shot of vitamin B-12 for an exhausted professional's soul.

Don't overwhelm yourself. The first time you attend a meeting or event, just go in and soak it all up first if you're scared. The next time actually talk to someone. No need to be desperate – you're just making conversation, asking people about how they got started in the industry, and doing a lot more listening than talking.

No professional design meetings in your area? Then go for the not-so-obvious choices. Pursue what you are interested in, but in way that puts you into contact with other people…

- community and cultural events like volunteering to give tours at a museum, pour drinks during an art walk or organize a theater fundraiser;

- hobbies like playing in a volleyball league, joining a quilting club, or participating in a watercolor painting group;

- church related activities like singing in the choir or planning vacation bible school;
charity work like volunteering for Habitat for Humanity, Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, or Special Olympics;

- social organizations like your school's alumni association, of which you can always be a part.

You may not believe it now, but THE WORLD IS A SMALL PLACE, and it's getting smaller by the minute. You never know whom other people know. Person X is Person Y's aunt, who is an interior designer in Los Angeles, and she's looking for an assistant… This is how things happen.

• | How do you set yourself apart? Believe it or not, the key is to keep showing up.

Just as an advertisement is more effective the more times you view it, the more your peers see and speak to you at different events, the easier it will be for you to establish relationships and, as a result, develop a stronger, more positive reputation. No one can share a laugh or have a meaningful conversation with you if you are home watching reruns of Say Yes To The Dress or Deadliest Catch. Get out there.

Stay Tuned | There is one last installment on the way, and it's a critical one. We'll talk about how to follow up with all those people you better be meeting, the reality of "six degrees of separation" and the absolute "don'ts" of networking.