

NETWORKING NUANCES

By Sheryl Spanier

A case study shows that when contacting associates, a warm, personal touch is the key to success

Networking is an art, not a science.

Yet, as growing numbers of job hunters recognize its potential, networking runs the risk of becoming routinized, formulaic and mechanical. A step-by-step, cut-and-dried approach to using one's network can destroy the aesthetics of the process and undermine its effectiveness.

Networking isn't a quick fix to the next job, it's part of life. With thought, sensitivity and preparation, networking becomes a natural way to build productive relationships. And, as the following case history illustrates, such relationships are the best source of employment opportunities.

Recently, Jeanne (a neighbor of mine) called to say she was planning a change in positions. She asked to chat with me about some options she was considering before embarking on a new job search. Although we didn't know each other well, I agreed to spend an hour with her.

At lunch the following week, Jeanne began: "As a human resources generalist for a bank the past three years, and having had some solid recruiting and client relations experience before that, I'm thinking about where I want to go next. The opportunities to advance with my organization make me think I should prepare to explore opportunities elsewhere."

In this statement, Jeanne gave me some important information about her background and expertise. She expressed commitment and control in her career attitude and handled the "why are you looking?" question with finesse.

"I know that because of your position you have a unique opportunity to meet with a variety of people, and that you have your finger on the pulse of career trends," Jeanne continued. "What I need now is the chance to review some of my ideas regarding my next step. I'm also hoping that you might know other people who could give me some specific direction as I continue my search."

Note that Jeanne made a specific request for the kind of assistance she knew I could provide. She complimented me on my knowledge and established her agenda. It's critical for the networker to be clear about the purpose early on.

I told Jeanne that I really didn't know of any human resources openings. However, I offered to keep her in mind should I hear of any. I asked if she had a resume.

It's easy for a contact to misunderstand the networker's intention. Many people assume that a person planning a job change is asking for a job.

Expressing her interest in hearing about anything I might think appropriate, Jeanne reasserted her agenda. "I'd certainly appreciate hearing about any opportunities you see developing," she said. "But my purpose in speaking with you today isn't to learn about jobs, and I would never presume to make you my personal volunteer headhunter."

By telling me she wasn't asking for job leads, Jeanne did three things: She developed the opportunity to discuss her broader purposes, defused my concern that she might be asking me about a job within my organization, and gave herself an opportunity to review her abilities. This is the point at which most people miss the benefit of networking. They focus too much on getting a job rather than on building relationships and gaining the perspective necessary for an active job search.

Jeanne next expanded her self-description to help me understand her direction. "I've specialized in recruiting and training, most recently having developed a career articulation program for the bank," she explained. "I've been responsible for recruiting within the technical and finance areas. I would really like to build on my ability to coordinate closely with executives in designing and meeting new hiring needs. The bank has benefited from my sensitivity to managers' needs, creating good personality and skill matches. As a matter of fact, I've been credited with the highest proportion of hire/retain statistics for our division this year.

"At this point, I'm exploring how to broaden my experience in human resources by developing some skills in compensation and benefits," she continued. "Everyone tells me that I can't move into a management role without this exposure. Another idea I have is to expand my recruiting experience into other areas, such as college recruiting or executive staffing."

Jeanne had obviously done her homework. She articulated her strengths, presented some highlights of important accomplishments, and reviewed a couple of alternatives for consideration. This information allowed me to focus on what she had to offer rather than on helping her connect with openings.

I suggested to Jeanne that she build on what she enjoyed doing most, keeping in mind her desire to move into a management role. I added that another alternative might be to move into a line or business unit area to develop a more differentiated background.

Jeanne thanked me for this advice and asked if I knew anyone who had made a similar move. I thought of a client who had recently taken a business unit position and another friend who was a senior vice president of human resources for an accounting firm.

Jeanne next asked for my opinion of industries to target. She wanted to move into something more glamorous than banking, but she'd found recruiters unwilling to consider her for an industry change.

"I'd enjoy speaking with anyone whom you think can give me an opportunity to explore my background in relation to the fashion industry," she said. "Also, the high-tech and communications industries are interesting to me because of their expanding labor needs. Do you know anyone with whom I should be speaking in these areas?"

By moving to an industry exploration, Jeanne expanded her agenda, engaged my interest beyond connecting her with people in the financial services industry and jogged my mind for more contacts. She didn't pick these areas accidentally. Jeanne knew my recruiting experience had involved the fashion and communications industries. Preparation enabled Jeanne to focus on topics and questions she knew I was able to address. I was impressed by her professionalism and forethought. I had no reservations about referring her to others.

By the end of our conversation, Jeanne had requested the names of four people from whom she could gather more information, perspective and visibility. She asked me for specific advice regarding the best approach to each person. We agreed that she could call two directly. I would write a brief introductory note to the other two letting them know that she would be contacting them soon. Jeanne also offered to have her secretary type the letters of introduction for my signature rather than impose further on my time.

It's important that Jeanne kept her eye on her career exploration agenda. She accepted my offer to make introductions, but made sure they occurred through her own effort. Depending on my spare time or memory to carry out the favor might have prolonged the process.

At the end of our luncheon, Jeanne thanked me for my advice and told me that she would let me know how things were going. A few days after our meeting, I received a lovely handwritten thank-you note from her. She said that a draft of my introduction letter would follow under separate cover. When her draft arrived, we spoke on the phone about revisions. Jeanne also told me that she had phoned the other two contacts already and had meetings arranged with them.

After the letters were finalized and sent, Jeanne and I agreed to stay in touch as her campaign progressed. I heard from her approximately every three weeks. She updated me on her progress, shared some new ideas she had gained from her meetings, and sent me a copy of her revised resume aimed at the fashion retailing industry. She had made some adjustments in her goals and career direction based on her information meetings, she said. Based on her revised plans, I suggested three or four more contacts. During the months that followed, Jeanne sent me a few articles she thought might interest me and introduced me to three people she had met along the way. The people she met through my introductions passed her along to more contacts. Two recommended her within their own companies. All told, Jeanne met 10 people through the original four.

Jeanne's consistent follow-up kept her top-of-mind with her contacts. I never felt imposed upon because she was always positive and interesting to speak with. She also demonstrated a knack for relationship building by introducing me to others she met. In its best form, networking involves giving, as well as receiving. Jeanne never contacted me without a specific purpose: to relay a message from one of my contacts, to bring me up-to-date on her progress or to offer to do something for me. She truly understood the importance of quid pro quo.

The other day I received a call from a colleague who works for a leading retail concern. He asked if I knew an aggressive human resources generalist with strong interpersonal skills and a good track record in recruiting. Guess whom I thought of immediately?!

Jeanne was clearly the best applicant. My colleague called to thank me for the referral. I looked good and he was relieved to find a qualified candidate without paying for advertising or a recruiter's fee.

What really got Jeanne the job? She applied the nuances of networking: preparation, relationship building, personalizing each meeting, and follow-up. Our next lunch will be to celebrate her new position.