

Building Your Network Strategically

By Hazel Walker

We all know that the economy has shifted; how could you not know it? The economy is what the economy is; we can stay up nights worrying about it, but that achieves nothing. As I network and have the opportunity to speak with people, I have noticed a very strong trend. There are two kinds of people out there: those with strong networks and those without strong networks. Those with strong networks seem to be upbeat, positive and not caught up in the hype of the bad economy, while those without networks seem to be struggling to come to grips with their current situation, having nowhere to turn or no one to connect to.

While the economy does indeed play a major role in our ability to do business with others, having a strong network that is nurtured and easily accessed is vital to our ability to move forward with ease. Employees who have been downsized and find themselves seeking work are faring better if they have developed and maintained a strong network of people who can help to connect them, support them and pass them needed information; they too suffer from less of the gloom and doom attitude.

Think of the tightrope walkers at the circus; under the wire is a very large net and should the performer fall, the net is there to catch them. Your network is your net when you are facing economic tough times. If you have spent little time building and nurturing that network in the last three to five years, it will feel like you are walking a tightrope without a net.

There are three important networks to consider developing, not just for your professional life but your personal life as well.

1. Your Support Network

Everyone needs a support network. Unfortunately, people often find themselves in a position of needing support and having no one in their network who can help them. They did not develop this network prior to needing it, once you need it you are behind the eight ball. Your support network can be valuable for many of your personal and professional needs. People who may be in your support network might include the following:

- Mentors past or present
- People you have helped
- People you have taught or mentored
- Co-workers, colleagues, associates and classmates
- Family and close friends
- Other members of non-business groups
- Former managers, supervisors and instructors
- Church leaders, members and groups

2. Your Information Network

Building your information network will be one of the most valuable networks you can create for yourself. Information is a commodity that others will buy, sell and trade. Having a strong information network will allow you to make decisions, get information,

share information and get things done in a prompt and professional way. Many of the most powerful people in the world have strong information networks. When you have access to information, you will be able to find jobs others may not know about and will have opportunities and access to deals that are not public. People in this network would be:

- People who are trying to achieve the same things you want to achieve
- People who are in the business or profession you are in
- People who were in the business or profession you are in
- People who write or produce books, audio or videos in your industry
- People who regulate, audit or monitor others in your field
- People who train others in your profession
- People who advise or consult with people in your field
- Members of trade, business or professional organizations in your field

3. Your Referral Network

This network is made up of people who know, like and trust you. They are willing to connect you to others who can buy from you or who know someone that you want or need to know. They are willing to open their contact files and make a phone call on your behalf. Whether you are an employee at a company or self-employed, this network connects you to:

- People in your contact sphere
- Current or former clients
- People who get more business when you get more business
- People you do business with, other than your suppliers and vendors
- Current or former staff members, part or full time
- People you have given referrals to
- Anyone who has given you referrals
- Other members of a business referral group
- Members of networking groups or associations

Your Contacts

These are simply the people that you meet day to day and add to your database. They may not fit into any of the other three categories, but they are still people with whom you can develop relationships. Nurture this network and move these contacts into your other networks.

Take a moment and list the people in your database with an S, I or R – support, information and referral, respectively. Note that many people will fit in more than one of your networks. One person could be in your support and information networks, as well as your referral network. Ideally, you would want to have 15-20 people in each of the three categories and possibly more in your contacts.

Once you have sorted your database, you will know where the voids are in your network. Be diligent and pay attention to your network. Adding people to your database with no plan or reason will not create a network, it will create a database. Your network will work

for you when you need it if you have taken the time to nurture the network and build relationships with the people you have added.

Strong networks are built on the givers gain philosophy: you give to your network, reward your network and nurture your network. Good networking is more about farming than it is about hunting. It is about caring for, adding to, purging out those things that do not work in the network and adding new members when necessary. The key is to build a strong organized network when you don't need it. It will pay off later when you do.