



Is Your Networking Stale?

By Carol Schiro Greenwald

Many successful networkers get into networking ruts without even realizing it. They do what they've always done, but don't feel the time spent was valuable. Their networking group meetings seem flat. They attend to catch up with friends. The strategic reasons they joined the group and the opportunity to pursue goal-related ideas seem less relevant. Their strategic networking has gone stale.

What has changed? When networking goes stale, where does the problem lie? How is the health and vitality of a group dependent on the behavior of group members? This article discusses this interdependency and the role of group members in setting the character of the groups they belong to.



Carol Schiro Greenwald, Ph.D.

is a marketing and management strategist, trainer and coach. She works with professionals and professional service firms to structure and implement growth programs that are targeted, strategic and practical. Her book, *Strategic Networking for Introverts, Extroverts and Everyone in Between* (American Bar Association, Law Practice Division, January 2019) explains how to strengthen the effectiveness of professionals' networking activities.

KEEP THE "STRATEGIC" IN NETWORKING

Effective, efficient networking begins with your goals. The places you go to network, the people you choose to network with and the issues you discuss with them should all be related to your objectives. The general purpose of networking is to create trust-based relationships through shared encounters and activities. Business networking adds the word "strategic" to signify a focus on

identifying and pursuing specific relationships that will introduce you to new ideas and people who want your services and can help you move forward.

Networking is an important strategy for attorneys and other professionals because we humans are basically just another category of animal. Since Neanderthal days, humans have survived by participating in collaborative, team efforts. Then and now, before adding someone to our team, we want to assess the person in the flesh, evaluate their behavior and decide if they would be a trustworthy addition to our world.

Networking creates friendships. Strategic networking activities build reputations and lead to business. It takes time that might be spent on other pursuits. To use networking time efficiently, the best networkers keep the strategic element of their networking front and center. Instead of relying on random acts of lunch, they focus on specific networking activities designed to move them toward their goals.

HOW CAN YOU IMPLEMENT "STRATEGIC"?

Good networkers begin with a set of well researched goals. They identify a target niche and try to define it as narrowly as possible in order to keep the required research to a manageable size.

For example, Joe is an intellectual property attorney who focuses on pharmaceutical companies' products. Within pharmaceuticals, his real sweet spot is cancer drugs. By narrowing his focus to this one set of drugs, he limits the number of possible product lines and companies he needs to be familiar with. He also limits the number of trade and professional associations relevant to these clients.

To focus his in-person networking, he joins two of his clients' primary associations as well as his own bar association, the IP bar association and his state's bar. He is also a member of two local networking groups whose members offer complementary resources and potential opportunities for referrals and work.

All the specific initiatives and activities Joe undertakes are designed to educate these varied audiences about the benefits of using his knowledge and experience to minimize their problems or maximize their opportunities. He has been a speaker on the target's business associations' panels, a contributor to an industry blog and podcast series, author of white papers distributed through his firm's website and a go-to lawyer when journalists are writing about these drugs.

After about two years of successful networking in these venues, Joe's leads, referrals and branding opportunities decrease. Joe reviews his goals and his networking strategy. They still seem appropriate. What he doesn't see is that he has stopped doing the preparatory work before meetings, following up rigorously, and initiating

business-related conversations. He is coasting, welcoming friendships, and not working the room with his business goals in mind.

Joe doesn't see the relationship between his behavior and the relevance of his group. Joe is not alone. Groups take on the personality of the members. When too many members decide to coast along and heed the siren call of friendship the nature of the group reflects this change.

MEMBERS SET THE PERSONALITY AND PURPOSE OF THE GROUPS THEY BELONG TO

There is a symbiotic relationship between a group member's focus of attention and a group's dynamic. Often, when networking initiatives and groups fail it is because the collaboration sizzle fades away. A friendship focus can smother business exchanges, because the former requires only that you show up, while the latter takes time to think about and prepare for.

When too many people attach more value to group friendships than to group business development, business networking groups lose vitality. Of course, the emphasis on friendship versus work is not usually an either/or: it is a continuum.

When members notice a slide toward fun rather than purpose, they can reverse it. Members create groups that mirror their own intentions. It is members' enthusiasm, energy and drive that create group dynamism.

Members need to take responsibility for the health of their networking groups. The best networkers know it is better to give than to receive because what goes around, comes around. The magic networking phrase, "How can I help you?" generates inter-connections that fuel successful groups.

Once networkers understand their responsibility, they need to secure their groups' vitality by refocusing on their business reasons for joining the group. These fall into two main categories: individuals' pre-meeting preparations and their enthusiastic participation at group events.

PRE-MEETING PREPARATIONS

You can just go to a meeting or *plan* to go to a meeting. Planning begins with consideration of the value of an activity in the context of your goals. Why do you want to attend a meeting? To learn about a new topic? To listen to the speaker? To meet interesting people in the audience?

Going to meetings is time intensive even if you don't prepare for it. You have to spend time to get to the location, then one to three hours for the activity, and more time to get back to your office. If you do prepare for the meeting that could add another hour as could time spent doing follow-up. So, there needs to be an affirmative answer to the question: How does this activity move me toward my goals?

After you decide to go, the proactive networker will research the group (if it is not one of his regular ones), the speakers, the attendees, and the topic. To research the speakers and attendees:

- Look at their LinkedIn and/or firm profiles in order to see if you want to make an effort to spend time with them during the event. Take note of the connections between them and your rationale for going to the activity.
- Many groups list the attendees on their website. Review the list looking for friends, acquaintances and people you would like to get to know.
- Once you identify people you want to connect with, send them an email asking to meet with them. If the person is a stranger, you may want to add why you want to meet them, what commonalities you share.
- If you know people in the group, you may also connect ahead of time with one or two to be sure to connect, sit next to them, etc. By reaching out ahead of time, you give more weight and value to your initiative.

In terms of the subject matter to be discussed, consider how it is relevant to your work. Google current articles on the topic. Reading ahead gives you an advantage in terms of subject matter discussions at the meeting. Since people tend to equate the networking behavior, they encounter with work behavior should they hire you, a bit of time spent brushing up on issues to be discussed burnishes your reputation as a diligent, prepared, knowledgeable professional.

Then take preparation one step further by creating a “conversation agenda.” This has three parts:

1. Think of two or three questions you would like to ask apropos of the topic and/or related to those you have connected with ahead of time. Write down two or three questions to raise in conversations. By planning these ahead of time, you are likely to ask more penetrating questions.
2. Prepare two or three subject matter topics that you would like to discuss. Run through possible conversations in your mind so that once at the meeting you know that you have a conversation starter.
3. Finally, tying back to the reason you decided to spend time to attend the activity, determine how you will define and measure success.

Preparing the agenda often makes it easier for introverts to attend events because the preparation gives them a sense of safety: questions to ask, information to share. Extroverts find that preparation keeps them from flitting

through a room by giving them a reason to have more in-depth conversations with preselected attendees.

AT THE MEETING

Energy comes from the attention people pay to meeting discussions and conversations and the caliber of the conversation. The responsible networker can add value in several ways:

- When you go around the table and everyone says who they are and what they do, listen closely and think about how what you know, who you know or what you do can help them meet their goals.
- Ask interesting questions.
- When talking with people at the meeting ask “How can I help you?” or “Where does your best business come from?” or “Who would you like to meet?” As you think about your resources that can help someone else, you will be dispersing the cooperative energy that charges a meeting.
- When your turn comes to introduce yourself try to make your comments strategic. Offer a short story that illustrates the benefits of what you do, who your clients are and what crisis led them to you. This will tie others’ perceptions of you to the kind of work illustrated in the story, and will suggest the kind of situation you are looking for.

Often you will want to make plans to continue a discussion or get to know someone better in a separate meeting.

- Make sure to plan one or two future meetings with individuals you talk to. Instead of the common one-on-one get-together, suggest a triad where adding a third person you both want to know better can lead to interesting opportunities.
- Or suggest that you each review the other’s LinkedIn list and select someone you would like to meet. Then you both bring the identified person to your meeting. Conversations can be lively, personal and very targeted because you each know two of the people at the table well enough to highlight the possible connections.
- If someone you had hoped to see did not attend the meeting, you can contact the person and offer to catch them up on the meeting.

Initiatives between group meetings are so important to a group’s vitality that most groups have a section of the meeting called “thank you’s and leads wanted” where people share whom they met with and who they want to meet. When there are many thank you’s and lead requests it emphasizes the purpose of the group and the energy in the room rises like a hot air balloon.

FOLLOW-UP

Follow-up is important for the success of both the individual networker and the group. First, in terms of the individual, you should add notes to your contacts system as soon as possible after you return to the office because the further the notetaking is from the event, the harder it is to remember details. And details are critical.

For example, if you learned of an important personal event in someone's life you will want to note it so you can send an appropriate message at the proper time. If you heard of a work-related opportunity you want to write down all the details to help you be precise when you follow up.

You also may want to note idiosyncratic points, such as what someone wore or ate or is reading. All the details over time coalesce into a multifaceted picture of the person.

As you go about networking in other venues, you should keep in mind the resources people have requested. Think of group members as resources for people they don't

know yet. By keeping group members top of mind you are adding to the group's strength.

You can also further your own strategy and build up your groups by bringing guests to meetings. Bringing a guest can help the person and also the group. Guests add new topics, insights and ideas to group discussions.

SUMMARY

The strength of your networking is affected by the venues in which you network. This is especially true if you have joined a group as part of a strategic networking plan focused on your goals. Members need to be cognizant of the need to resist the siren-like call of friendly fun and continue to be strategic about business-focused networking. It is the responsibility of networkers who join groups as part of their strategic plan to stay engaged, attend to their networking preparation and follow-up details, and continually work to create meaningful relationships within the group.

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