



Building Your “Sphere of Influence”: How to Create & Nurture a Powerful Network

By Kristen Kenton, President, Kenton Talent Management (www.kentontalent.com)
President & BOD Chair, Executive Women’s Summit (www.executivewomenssummit.com)

Early in my career as an Executive Recruiter, I was exposed to a great coach, Dr. Vance Caesar, who told me *“It’s not about who you know. It’s about who knows you, and the stories they tell about you in the world”*.

Networking does not have to be daunting if you do it right. It does not mean being a good “schmooser” and it does not always include shaking random hands in a room full of people you don’t know. True networking simply involves “warming up” relationships with friends of friends or colleagues of colleagues, and then proactively adding value to those relationships.

The best networkers are often great listeners, as opposed to great talkers. They have clear statements about who they are (this includes a strong elevator speech, which should include your value proposition) and what they want. Good networkers strive to create mutually-beneficial relationships with everyone they meet. This means understanding what unique value *you* bring to the relationship, based on their *unique and individual needs*. Value can take on many forms, such as sharing an interesting article, inviting someone to a relevant event, or introducing two people that would benefit from meeting one another. I think about this as the *“three I’s”* model, which illustrates a few of the ways we can help others: *Invitations, Introductions and Information*.

More importantly, the relationship does not end after the first meeting. Most people are not great networkers because they do not follow up! If you do follow up, it sends the message that the meeting was meaningful, and you intend to continue to foster the relationship. If you try to network without a clear plan of action, you may end up as a wall-flower, merely watching other people network and wondering why you gave up your time in the first place.

Ask thoughtful questions that prepare you to make a positive impact. Consider each of your relationships and gather information in four primary categories, or what I call the *“Four-C’s”*: *Career, Charity, Children and Church (or Community)*. When appropriate, ask each person in your network about each category (unless it is purely a new business relationship, in which case you will need to use your discretion when asking questions that could be viewed as too personal). However, most people appreciate transparency and vulnerability. Most of us don’t take the risk, and our relationships remain fairly depthless or superficial. Be memorable. Try to become more knowledgeable about each of the Four C’s for yourself, and your connections.

Why is Networking Important?

Believe it or not, many busy professionals don't fully recognize the benefits of networking (or they only make time for it when they are in career transition). It does take time if you do it well, but the ROI is significant. There are many reasons to invest time in building and nurturing your network or "sphere of influence".

If networking is done correctly, consistently and intentionally, the benefits are vast:

1. You should never have to look for a job again. In fact, it greatly increases your chances of being approached for career opportunities, even when you are not actively looking.*
2. You will build relationships that add value to all areas of your life (access to the best vendors/advisors, resources, knowledge, subject matter experts, new experiences, etc.)
3. You will become a more valuable and knowledgeable asset to those around you, both personally and professionally.
4. You will have the opportunity to become better branded and more respected within your community (socially, philanthropically and professionally).
5. You will obtain more freedom and flexibility (you will have access to new experiences, opportunities, promotions, and new doors will open in all areas of your life).

*If you are in career transition or considering a change, networking should be a full-time job. Networking is consistently cited as the number one way to get a new job. It is commonly stated that "80% of the jobs available never get advertised". 34% of new hires are credited to outside employee referrals. Hiring Managers would rather talk to someone who's been recommended by a person they already trust.

Where to Network

Networking in the wrong places will waste valuable time and it won't help you build a meaningful sphere of influence. Before joining any group or association, consider who attends and how much time is available to network. Service partners/vendors are a great resource when building your network. The right vendors, such as Executive Coaches, Bankers and Attorneys, are viewed as trusted advisors of the people you want to know. They also have valuable local business information, such as which companies are growing/ hiring, which associations or events are worth your time and who you should know in your area. You can also build or buy lists of national and local associations online. Visit sites such as www.meetup.com or www.AssociationExecs.com. Consider purchasing the Business Journal's *Book of Lists (most large cities have a "book" that segment the local market into valuable categories, such as fastest growing companies, or largest employers)*. You can also simply type "Associations and Denver" (or any desired location), function or industry into a Google search.

Often times, the best networking opportunities take place *before* the meeting starts. Consider taking a visible role in membership committees or boards. If you are a good public speaker or writer, post articles or start a blog. Or, offer your time as a keynote speaker (or facilitator) to the right organizations. Consider joining groups that will keep you abreast of the latest developments in your specific industry or function. Also consider groups that focus on self-marketing, branding, and proactive career management. Finally, join a group that will allow you to interact with relevant leaders, as part of a proactive career management plan.

Networking Resources

<http://www.rileyguide.com/nettips.html> (compiled numerous sources on networking tips and pointers from renowned authors and industry experts)

<http://www.rileyguide.com/enetwork.html> (combining traditional networking with technology)

<http://careerplanning.about.com/od/jobsearch/a/pms.htm> (developing a personal marketing strategy with a game plan, especially for a job search)

Denver Area Associations & Networking Opportunities (contact Kristen Kenton for a full list)

- Association of Corporate Growth (ACG),
<http://www.acg.org/denver/default.aspx>
- National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD), <https://www.nacdonline.org/>
- Turnaround Management Association (TMA)
<http://www.turnaround.org/rockymountain>
- Financial Executives International,
<http://www.feicolorado.org/>
- Rocky Mountain HR People + Strategy (RMHRPS), <http://rmhrps.wildapricot.org/>
- CXO, www.cxo.org
- HR Planning Society (SHRM's HRPS),
<http://www.hrps.org/>
- Executive Women's Summit,
www.executivewomenssummit.com
- Business Network International (BNI),
www.bnicolorado.com
- Executive Networking in Denver/ Meet Up:
www.meetup.com/topics/executive-networking/us/co/denver
- Touchstone Forum (EIT Luncheons):
<https://executivesintransition.worldsecuresystems.com/>

Suggested Reading (personal favorites)

How to Win Friends & Influence People, Dale Carnegie

Be Your Own Brand, David McNally & Karl Speak

It's Not Just Who You Know, Tommy Spaulding

Speed of Trust & The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, both by Steven Covey

The Success Principals, Jack Canfield

Working with Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman

Insight, Dr. Tasha Eurich

Now, Discover Your Strengths, Marcus Buckingham

The No Asshole Rule, Robert I. Sutton

Never Eat Alone, Keith Ferrazzi

The Start-up of You, Reid Hoffman

Give and Take, Adam Grant

Summary – Prepare to Take Action!

1. **Create and memorize your elevator speech.** Building your sphere of influence starts by getting to know *yourself*. Who are you? What is your value proposition? When should people think of you? What are your strengths and development opportunities? What does success look like, personally and professionally? Who will help you get there?

Consider the following format when constructing your elevator speech:

- **Sentence one:** *Help your contact “categorize” you. It might sound negative, but most of us want to categorize people and information in order to be more efficient and understand the dynamics involved. If you don’t categorize yourself, you risk your contact categorizing you incorrectly.*
- **Sentence two:** *Remind your contact what unique value you bring to relationships and how you want to be remembered.*
- **Sentence three:** *Tell your prospect, in specific terms, what you are looking for and how they can help.*
- **Sentence four:** *Call to action (Can we talk via phone or have coffee next week?)*

Then, create two versions of your elevator speech. One is an email introduction (use bullets, keep it brief, suggest specific times for meetings and end with an “ask”) and the other is your verbal elevator speech.

2. **Prepare to meet new people and add value.** Create a short list of questions to ask new relationships and be prepared to capture that information. Use your elevator speech when reaching out. In addition to asking questions within the “four C’s, consider asking your professional relationships:
 - Who is your ideal client or who would you like to know? In other words, when should I think of you and what types of introductions make sense?
 - What are your goals this year and what do you need to hit them?
 - What keeps you up at night? What are your biggest challenges, both personally and professionally?
 - Most importantly, how can I help?
3. **Attend the right venues. Make a list of people you want to know and ask for a meeting.** When attending events, even if you just meet *one* relevant contact, it was a success. When reaching out to individuals for a meeting, try to warm up the relationship first. Use LinkedIn and other tools to see who you know that already knows that person. Read their bios and familiarize yourself with their background(s). Maybe you went to the same school? Maybe you work in the same industry?
4. **Nurture your network and find creative ways to keep in touch while adding value: I call this the “Three I’s”**
 - *Inform* them by keeping them abreast of relevant *information* - create /share articles, blogs, etc.
 - *Invite* them to relevant events and meetings.
 - *Introduce* your contacts to each other.