



Connecting is the New Networking

What's your reaction when someone suggests you "network"? For many, an overwhelming dread is associated with this term—some out of fear of the unknown, and some because of having to ask others for help.

Networking seems so commonplace, and yet most are at a loss as to how to do it, or do it well.

Gary Frey, a friend to My Next Season, knows a thing or two about networking. Gary has held impressive roles within large and small companies, including founding a brand consultancy firm, serving as Chief Impact Officer at a private equity/wealth planning firm, President of Bizjournals.com, and Senior Vice President at Bank of America.

But while his resume is extensive, it is anything but linear. Amidst much career success, Gary experienced great loss and hardship, from discovering his partner's embezzlement to losing the bulk of his net worth in a private equity firm. Gary has had to persevere and redirect his career path, with all its unexpected twists and turns. He is where he is today because of what he calls "connecting," as opposed to networking.

In 2015, while living in Ohio with no job on the horizon, Gary and his wife started planning next steps. Why not look for a job in Charlotte, NC, where they desired to live? So, Gary traveled to Charlotte, not necessarily to "network," but in his mind, to *reconnect* with friends—and hopefully build new relationships.

Gary began by asking friends to help him "make some meaningful connections." During his two weeks in Charlotte, he ended up having 30 meetings. As impressive as that was, Gary ended up revisiting Charlotte for two more two-week stints, and set up another 60 meetings. On his last day of the third trip, he received a job offer.

Gary's Practical Networking/Connecting Pointers

Gary's "connecting" was essentially strategic networking. Gary suggests the following points to achieve your own smoother, more effective connecting/networking process.

- **Expand your network.** As extensive as your personal network may be, it is never big enough.
- **You need to connect with other connectors**, so list personal contacts who know you, and who could potentially connect you to others. (Gary initially contacted 20 people in Charlotte, and from there he was able to connect to others he didn't know, who in turn connected him to still others, to generate 90 meetings in a six-week span.) If you lack your own network, ask a trusted friend who does have a network to help.
- **Update your LinkedIn profile** with your most relevant work experience and a current, really good profile picture. Often, people you meet will first check out your LinkedIn profile—to get a gist of your background, and to see what you look like.

- **Email your personal contacts.** Keep it brief and to the point. Mention your interests/strengths and thoughts on what you see yourself pursuing, so your contact will have to think outside any box that he/she may have put you in. Like this—

- "As you know, I have been <insert positions held most recently> and am looking for the next thing. Here are a few things I'm looking for..."
- "Also, here is my LinkedIn profile <insert link> if you or someone else would like to know more about my experience."

- **Follow up with a phone call** if a week or two passes without hearing from your contacts. If need be, leave a message asking to get together for coffee/lunch/drinks. Ask for 30 minutes of their time.

- **Make it easy on those you are meeting.** Go to them. Pay for their coffee/breakfast/lunch. (Dinner is often off the table because people want to be with their families, though meeting for a drink after work may work.)

- **Don't let yourself be pigeon-holed.** If you see people limiting their search for you, based on your previous work experience or the job they last knew you had, it is up to you to reshape the conversation. Share your vision for what you are thinking career-wise, as well as your strengths. (For Gary, it had been 10+ years since he had been in Charlotte, and his contacts knew him

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as a marketing guru. They didn't know of his broader experience, working with high-net-worth clients. He shared his vision to reshape the conversation.)

- **Know your audience.** Every city is different. Is your city a breakfast city? Do people wear suit and tie? It is always better to err on the side of caution and be over-dressed, rather than too casual. Business casual is often a safe bet.
- **Never miss an opportunity, even a doubtful one.** When a friend/contact suggests you meet with one of their contacts, always do so, even if you don't think it will serve you. You never know what will come of it! (Gary was hesitant to meet with a few contacts along the way, but one of those uncertain contacts eventually led to a job offer.)
- **Personal introductions to new contacts are worth their weight in gold.** One of Gary's personal contacts suggested he meet with one of their contacts, so Gary asked if they'd be willing to make an introduction on his behalf (call or email). Gary also offered to send his contact an email outlining what he was looking for along with his LinkedIn profile link, so his contact could forward this email directly.
- **State your "ask" early in the conversation.** Don't directly ask for a job, but rather share your interest, work history, passions, strengths. Make it clear why you're there and don't beat around the bush.
 - When it feels right, say something like, "As you get to know me, does anything resonate? Do you know of anybody I should know? If so, will you connect me?"
 - Also, be sure to ask, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

- **Treat everyone you meet with respect.** They are doing you a favor by sharing their time and resources. Be curious about their own career path and ask good questions.
- **Think about other ways to expand your network.** Find networking events in your city. Consider your passions and hobbies—are there networks or organizations you could get involved in? These are good places to build more relationships.
- **If you plan to move to a new city, make clear you have real plans.** People are wary of job applicants who say they'll move, but offer no specifics.

Mentality & Motivation Behind Networking

It is tempting to want a formula for networking or connecting, but Gary's approach is more holistic and above all is *other-centric*, rather than self-centric. His story suggests a mentality and motivation behind networking that is more intent on relationship-building than self-improvement. Here are points to consider as you reconstruct your own networking foundation.

- **Get outside yourself and ask how you can help others.** It is natural to be self-consumed when networking. But instead of walking into a meeting thinking, "I hope this lands me a job," let your motivation be to *help the other person*. Not only does this make a better impression; it's a reminder to you that others have concerns beyond your goals.
- **View your meetings as opportunities to build relationships.** Networking activities are often transactional and seem to be a means to an end, but don't view them that way. What can you learn from those you meet?
- **Your job does not define your worth.** Remember this, and you will be less likely to feel intense pressure when

meeting with people and figuring out what is next.

- **Humility is key.** Despite the positions and roles you've had, right now you need help from others. This is a good place to be, though it may not feel that way.
- **If someone goes out of their way to connect you to their contacts,** be sure to express your thanks. People are spending their time and energy to help you. Express gratitude and look for opportunities to pay it forward.
- **Believe that you will add value to another organization.** Be confident in what you have to offer, including your non-expertise areas.
- **Get out there and stay open to where your connections lead.**
- **Enjoy yourself!** Enjoy the interesting people you meet and new opportunities to connect. There will be positive surprises along the way—watch for them and enjoy!

About Gary Frey: When we heard that Gary Frey, a friend of **My Next Season**, connected with 90 people over the course of three two-week trips to Charlotte while seeking a new position, we had to learn more. Gary has applied his other-centered approach not only to networking but also to helping grow organizations. He has served as president of four successful companies, including bizjournals.com, a business news portal which he helped transform from a three-person organization to a \$100 million company. In addition, he has held executive positions in two Fortune 100 companies guiding both through major branding or re-branding efforts.

By Kathryn Trice
Executive Associate

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