

Work Daze: Don't hire me now - I'm networking

by *Bob_Goldman*

If you're not working, you should be networking. In a period when the economy is in critical condition, spending your spare time working your network is critical.

But how can you follow the 11th Commandment, Thou Shalt Network, when you are a cranky, antisocial, shy guy or gal who can't blow their own horn without sounding off-key, and who views any trip outside their personal space with fear, dread, and projectile vomiting?

The answer to this and other networking questions were the subject of a recent Phyllis Korkki's "Career Couch" column in "The New York Times." As usual, the information Korkki gathers from her own network of career advisors is well-meaning but very unrealistic, given the reluctance of people like you to wear your heart on your sleeve and your resume on your forehead.

What's important to understand here is that networking is not simply a desperate game of "Meet Me. Like Me. Hire Me." "Networking is a matter of teaching and learning rather than trying to put something over on someone," says Anne Baber, co-founder of Contacts Count. "Instead of thinking 'What can I get out of this?' Think 'what can I give to this?'"

But what if you have nothing to give, except a wet-fish handshake and a hard-luck story? I say: fortify that limp handshake with cash! "I'll give you \$100 if you'll be my best friend forever," is an excellent, if expensive, way of making new connections. Yes, it might seem a trifle juvenile to troll for BFFs, but let's face facts — anyone who's going to hire you has to be a victim of some seriously arrested development. And if the price of nabbing a new job is selling your entire Beanie Baby collection, I say, pay it.

If the effort of dragging yourself to a job these last few years has eaten into your networking efforts — good news! According to expert Liz Ryan, it's never too late to work your network, "raggedy and uncultivated" as it might be.

The idea here is to use your newly found spare time between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. to make a list of every human being who has ever crossed your path in the tragic parade to futility that is your career. No, you can't include me, but you can list angry ex-spouses and parole officers.

Given your personal history and abundant character flaws, I strongly suggest you focus your networking activities on people who have no idea who you are. It would also make sense to ask these victims of your networking activities for referrals before they learn anything about you. (You could, however, look for former kindergarten classmates to serve as referrals. Back then, everyone thought you had potential.)

If you find yourself overly depressed and under-motivated when it comes to attending networking events, remember that even if you do not come back with a job offer in your pocket, these crowded, hectic events provide an excellent opportunity to fill that empty pocket with paper napkins, silverware, tablecloths, and drapes, all of which you can sell on eBay. (Those attractive, "Hi, My Name is" badges are useful when you show up at the food bank, looking for government cheese. The social workers will be so afraid of you, no one will ask for your credentials.)

After hunting for leftovers, if you do have any time leftover for networking, Ryan suggests you dial down the desperation. If asked about your job, Ryan opines, casually mention that you are looking, but don't make a big deal of it.

I agree. People today don't want to be seen having a chinwag with a loser like you. That's why you have to put on your confident, cheerful, fully employed face when you network. Of course, it wouldn't hurt to occasionally break into bitter sobbing, punctuating by heroic sniffs and sniveling as you demonstrate your personal fortitude in the face of adversity. You could even ask your new networking friends for hugs as you pull yourself together.

Follow this advice and you're sure to leave the event with business cards from people you can start calling three, five or 10 times a day. Believe me, once your new best friends forever see you could be a pest forever when you have no work to do, they'll move heaven and earth to get you a job. And isn't that what networking is all about?

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