*Financial Mail Women's Forum Blog #2: Principles of good networking*

*Neil Munz-Jones published The Reluctant Networker in 2010.  It has been featured in a number of leading publications such as The Sunday Times, The Guardian, People Management and Good Practice.  In the second in a series of blogs Neil writes about principles of good networking.*

In the first blog I covered a number of networking 'myths and realities'.  These touch on some of the important principles of good networking that are covered in The Reluctant Networker:

Principle #1: Change your mindset...we network all the time

Principle #3: Effective networkers build long-term relationships based on trust

Principle #6: It's a two-way thing: give as well as take

In summary you'll need to think of networking as a lifelong way of doing business where you give as well as take.  And remember that it does not mean having to go to lots of networking events to benefit from networking...events are just a means to an end, not the end in itself.

Here are a few more principles of good networking from The Reluctant Networker.  Think of these principles as a framework that underpins all your networking activities.

### *Principle #2: Develop a style that works for you*

There are plenty of experts, good books and courses that tell you all the different ways to network.  This may include how to 'work a room', and if you are trying to find a new role, standard letters, telephone style and technique and what to ask for when in a networking meeting.  When I read many of these they made me feel uncomfortable.  Other Reluctant Networkers I have spoken to say they find many of these techniques difficult to embrace, as they make them come across as too 'pushy'.

The most important thing is to find a style that works for you.  You are marketing yourself as a unique individual, not some off the shelf product.  In my experience if you want to build personal rapport with people they need to get a sense of the real you.   And that is much easier if you are being 'authentic' than if you are forcing yourself to do and say things that you find difficult.

There is no one style that is 'best'.  I know effective networkers that adopt very different approaches.  Some are incredibly organised and plan their networking in great detail.  Others are a lot less structured, and are happy as long as they are regularly 'out there' talking to and meeting their network.  Some spend all their time at networking events, others focus on one-to-one meetings while others focus on the telephone.

To be an effective networker you will probably need to use all of these activities.  But the key is to find the ways to network that you feel comfortable doing and make them the focal point of your activities.  It is much harder to stick at activities for a long time that you really

do not enjoy....and remember networking is a lifelong activity!  I do go to networking events and I do use the phone but I focus my networking on one-to-one meetings over coffee, a drink or lunch as I actively enjoy these activities.  When I go to events I make a big effort and I certainly find that the more I practice, the better I get...but I don't make going to events the core of my networking activities.

### Principle #5: Tap into your network's networks

*"The only thing worse in the world than being talked about is not being talked about" Oscar Wilde*

Everybody has heard of the saying "it's not <u>what</u> you know but <u>who</u> you know".  This principle expands the point to say that it is "who <u>they</u> know" that really counts.  If you are a member of the one of the business networking sites such as LinkedIn you can access your 'network statistics'... This tells you not only how many $1^{st}$ degree connections that you have (i.e. the 'who you know'); more importantly it tells you how many people they are connected to (your $2^{nd}$ degree connections i.e. the 'who they know').  With over 500 $1^{st}$ degree connections on LinkedIn I have over 100,000 people as $2^{nd}$ degree connections and this increases to nearly 5 million $3^{rd}$ degree connections.  Think of all those eyes and ears that could be looking out for you.

There are plenty of reports and statistics that show how more jobs get found via networking rather than the formal channels such as responding to adverts or contacting recruitment agencies or headhunters.  A US study in the 1990's ("Getting a Job: A Study in Contacts & Careers") found that 56% had got their jobs through networking.  Critically, of this 56%, over 80% got these jobs through what Mark Granovetter called 'weak ties' i.e. a slightly known or recently met contact.  The implication of this is that if you can access your network's networks, you can dramatically increase your chances of finding work quickly.  And this is not just true when looking for a job.  I have had great help from people in my 'network's networks' just to do my job well e.g. getting help finding answers to new problems, getting recommendations when 'buying' services, getting introductions to people when I was recruiting new staff etc.

So when it comes to tapping into your network's networks, here are a few of pointers:

- Build your network of active contacts...the more you have increases the number of people that you can access exponentially.

- Make sure your network knows you are out there and the sorts of things you are interested in.

- Participate actively in social networking sites such as LinkedIn.  They allow you to find really easily which one person of your tens or hundreds of thousands of $2^{nd}$ (or even $3^{rd}$) degree connections may be able to help you when you have a particular need.

### Principle #8: Do it while you do not 'need' anything

The best time to network is when you don't need anything.  For some reason many people feel uncomfortable asking for help when they need something.  It is strange because when those same people are <u>asked</u> for help, they are usually flattered to have been asked and more than willing to help.  As a result it is much easier to talk to people when you don't 'need' anything from the conversation.  This could be either when talking on the phone (we'll get onto 'catch up calls' in future blogs on Practical Tips) or when talking to someone at an event or in a one-to-one meeting.

Not needing anything takes all the pressure off the conversation.  What you are doing in these conversations is building the relationship by getting to know each other better. For people that you do not know that well it is a means to find out what you have in common, whether you get on and how you could possibly help each other out in the future.  For people you already know well, it is a way to strengthen the relationship and should be an enjoyable activity!

So even though I am constantly amazed at how willing people are to help (even when I do not know them that well), the issue for many Reluctant Networkers is that they find it difficult to ask in the first place.  Building these strong relationships over time makes it so much easier it is to ask for help when you really do need something.  You'll probably also find that you don't need to ask for help so often because your network of contacts will already be volunteering much of the information and introductions that help you make a success of your career over time.

This is easier said than done!  You don't 'need' to network because you already have a role; the trouble is that the role you have leaves you very little time to network with new and old contacts, unless directly related to your work.  The best advice is "Make time!" but also try not to be too ambitious/unrealistic about the amount of time you can devote to networking.  Try and set aside some time each week or month (one hour a month is less than 1% of your working month) to meet with new contacts or call, email or meet existing contacts.  It is amazing how your existing contacts tend to be too busy to keep in touch, yet if you contact them, they respond and are happy to speak or meet.

The next blog will feature the first in a series of Practical Tips on 'how' to network, starting with Practical Tips for the time-poor professional!

About the book and the author:

*Since publishing The Reluctant Networker Neil gives inspirational talks on networking for organisations such as The FT, The IOD and INSEAD as well as several professional services firms.  He has appeared as a guest on BBC Radio and as a networking expert on The Guardian's Live Q&A.  In addition to giving talks on networking Neil runs mdj2 associates a consulting firm working with clients in the retail sector.  See [www.reluctantnetworker.com](www.reluctantnetworker.com)*