Networking Means Being Useful

Idea In Short

Networking fails when it is transactional and self-interested, and succeeds when it starts from genuine usefulness: giving time, advice or referrals before asking for anything, staying interesting enough to be worth talking to and sustaining relationships for a decade or more without keeping score.

The Wrong Way to Network

Plenty of networking is flaky, selfish and transactional, which is the opposite of what actually works.1 People are wired toward some degree of self-interest, whether from evolutionary wiring or the general dissociation of modern community life, and that instinct is precisely what good networking has to work against.

Think Win-Win

The useful reframe is imagining the interaction from the other person's perspective. If reaching out to an alum as a student, the question worth asking is whether the conversation was genuinely useful and pleasant for them, informed and respectful rather than a burden, and whether they would take a call again. A well-known Venn diagram by writer Jessica Hagy captures this succinctly: what you are good at, what you love and what people will pay for overlap only when the relationship serves both sides.2

Give Before You Get

Building a genuine community, or what author Seth Godin calls a tribe, starts with finding ways to give first: time, advice, referrals, honest feedback or even useful templates and tools. The worst possible moment to start networking is while unemployed and desperately job-hunting, which functions as begging rather than networking, since there is nothing to offer in return at that moment except need.

Be Genuinely Interesting

A surprising number of otherwise capable professionals freeze when a cocktail-party conversation demands genuine engagement rather than small talk. Breaking the ice well means finding real common ground, something both people actually care about, which requires staying current on relevant news: industry shifts, company earnings, a sharp article worth discussing. Standing out from a room of generic conversations starts with having something specific to say.

Networking Is the First Inning, Not the Game

Think of the initial connection as the first inning of a seven-game series: the most talked-about part of the process, and far from the actual goal. The goal is a meaningful relationship, one where the other person finds you trustworthy, competent and worth staying in touch with, whether that means monthly contact or once a year. Sustaining a genuine professional relationship for ten to fifteen years is the actually difficult part, since it is easy to let people drift and easy to reach out only when there is something to ask for. The real payoff of relationship-building tends to arrive years after the first conversation, not during it.

Plant the Tree Now

Patience is the whole strategy. Author Keith Ferrazzi, who wrote extensively about relationship-building and once served as a chief marketing officer at a major consulting firm, put it plainly: do not keep score.3 The best time to plant a relationship, like a tree, was years ago; the second-best time is now, and there is no such thing as making new old friends, which is exactly why starting early matters more than starting cleverly.

Networking Inside the Organization Counts Too

The instinct to network externally, across firms and industries, sometimes crowds out an easier, higher-return version of the same behavior: building genuine relationships with colleagues two or three levels removed inside the same organization. Internal relationships built the same way, giving before asking, staying genuinely interesting, checking in without an agenda, compound just as reliably as external ones and often pay off faster, since internal staffing and promotion decisions happen on a shorter timeline than most external opportunities ever will.

The Follow-Up Nobody Sends

The single most common networking failure is not a bad first conversation; it is the follow-up that never happens. A warm introduction or a genuinely good meeting decays quickly without a next touchpoint, and the fix requires almost no effort: a short note within a day or two referencing something specific from the conversation, followed by a light, non-transactional check-in months later rather than only reaching out again when a need arises. The relationships that last fifteen years are rarely the product of one memorable meeting. They are the product of five or six forgettable, low-effort touchpoints spread out over years, none of which asked for anything.

A Real Example

One story worth remembering: a consulting partner built a strong client relationship that traced back more than fifteen years, to when the client was a junior professional and the partner was simply a working consultant. As the client rose through their career and changed jobs, they kept hiring the same partner. The partner delivered good work, the client looked good internally and got promoted, and the partner got hired again, a genuinely win-win outcome built entirely on patience and consistency rather than any single clever pitch.

- 1Social Network
- 2Reciprocity (Social Psychology)
- 3Keith Ferrazzi

Summary

Networking is not the goal; a sustained, trustworthy relationship is. Give before you get, stay interesting and current, and plant relationships years before you need them. The best networking rarely looks like networking at all.