

# Network Maintenance — Tools for Staying Connected



by *Olivia Fox Cabane*

How healthy is your network? It's no good working morning till night making great contacts if you let them die of neglect afterwards. A network is like a plant — it needs daily care and attention. So how do you get yours to flourish?

## The System

Which communication method do you prefer — e-mail, voicemail or snail mail? Ideally, you should get into the habit of calling, e-mailing and meeting contacts every day. How many? As many as you can handle without overly interrupting your normal day. Start at a level that seems easy for you, and add one contact to the daily number as soon as you're comfortable.

Once a month, carefully comb through your entire address book. Situations change, new opportunities arise, and ideas will jump to your mind. As you read each name, think of what you can offer each person.

One of the most effective networking techniques is **referrals**. Carina Levintoff, managing partner of the New York office of CMS/BFL, agrees. She told me, "The best way to keep in contact with people is simply to refer work to them! I keep in close contact with lawyers I work with, whether on my side of the deal or on the opposing side. Later on, they'll often send clients my way, when, for instance, they're unable to represent a client because of a conflict."

An alternative to referrals is **visibility**. Do you belong to a trade organization that could invite this person to speak? You could also offer **credibility** if you have contacts at a university where you could have this person invited to be a guest lecturer. Do you have valuable **information** to share about a project they're working on? Do you know of a **resource** that would make their life easier?

Another highly effective technique is to think of whom, in your address book, this contact would benefit from meeting. Think of how his or her needs connect with other people's resources, just like a Rubik's Cube, until the pieces fall together. For instance, one of our clients realized that one of his contacts, the president of an industrial packaging company, would benefit from meeting another one of his contacts, the CEO of a small cosmetics firm. This CEO had recently told him how unhappy he was with his product packages.

You can also think of something for their kids. No matter how important someone gets, their children are sacred to them. Help the child, and the parent will never forget it. One of my best business contacts — who has since become a close friend — had a son applying to an Ivy League university. The day before the interview, she called me to ask me a few words of advice on how her son could make a great first impression and wow the interviewer. I started giving advice, and then simply offered to meet with the kid and teach him how to make a great first impression, how to master the art of conversation and get the interviewer to like him. It was a small thing for me — I love sharing skills — yet for him (and therefore, her) it was invaluable. The interview went fabulously well, the kid was a hit, and my relationship with his mother took a quantum leap.

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## The Tools

### Writing

One of the secret weapons of master networkers can be summarized in two words: write notes. The notes should be handwritten in blue ink if possible. Why blue? Research indicates that blue elicits trust more than black. You can designate a certain time in your schedule to write notes, or carry stamps and stationery with you. Then, whenever you're waiting anywhere, you can dash off a note and send it out.

First and foremost, write **thank-you notes**. After meeting someone, you can thank them for taking time to meet you. You can also thank people for good advice they have given, for interesting information or for a phone meeting, especially if you spoke with someone for the first time or if you spoke for a long time. Whenever someone helps you in some way, aim to thank them within 48 hours — and then, keep them up to date with the effects of their help over the long term.

If you're really gutsy, **birthday notes** can be a true power tool. Yes, I actually do send people birthday notes — although most frequently, I call them up and treat them to my joyfully earsplitting rendition of the Hill sisters' eternal tune. "But how do you know their birthday in the first place?" say you. Well, it's fairly simple: after I've known someone for a while, I simply ask them by way of a phone conversation or e-mail, "By the way, when's your birthday?" If they ask why, I answer, "So I can sing to you when it rolls around," which usually brings a chuckle.

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I usually try to call when people are out of the office — on purpose. Voicemails are a great way to keep in touch. Without taking as much time, they give you the same "top of mind" awareness as a full-blown conversation. Leave them on weekends or holidays, when you know you'll go straight to voice-mail, and be ready. For instance, Nelson Davis, executive producer of KTLA, will leave wonderful Thanksgiving-greeting voicemails on Thanksgiving Day, when he knows people will be out of the office. What a wonderful message to come back to!

**Holiday greetings** are another great category of notes. As long as you personalize them, they can truly make you stand out from the pack. The reference to a golf trip or a child's graduation will set your card apart from the dozens of impersonal printed cards arriving in the mail. There are other days that allow you to give the personal touch, such as writing Jewish clients for Rosh Hashanah, Irish clients for St. Patrick's Day or French friends on the occasion of Bastille Day.

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#### Rip 'n' Send

In the same vein, clippings from newspapers or magazines can earn you major points. When you see an article that relates to someone's business, industry or personal projects, send it along with a short "thought you'd enjoy" note. Don't forget the comic strips. When a story makes you think of someone you know, cut it out, and send it. If you're lucky, they'll tack it up in their office and think of you every time they see it. Talk about "top of mind" awareness!

When one of your contacts appears in the media, send a copy of the article with a congratulatory note. Are you thinking that surely they've received a lot of praise already? Actually, most people mean well but tend to forget to pass along those words of praise or encouragement.

For important contacts, you might want to take advantage of Google's Alerts feature. Google News Alerts are e-mail messages sent to you by Google with links to pages that mention keywords you've chosen. In this manner, you can create alerts relating to a contact's name, company or specific industry. You'll know if they've received an award or were quoted in an article, if their company was just featured in the news or if an event is rocking their industry

For instance, say that one of your targets is the CEO of a biotech company in Boston. You can create an alert for his name (Dan Brown), for his company (BioTrek), his industry (biotechnology) and even for hobbies and interests you know of (fly fishing or stamp collecting, for example). You won't need to spend any more time scouring the Web for items that may be of interest or of value to him — Google will do the job for you. To sign up, simply visit <http://www.google.com>, click on "News," and then click on "News Alerts." It's unlimited, and it's free.

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#### The Travel: Networking on the Road

Think also of using unavoidable traveling time as a maintenance system. Before you leave for a city for a conference or to visit a client, comb through your network to find out who is from the area or has spent a lot of time there. Ask them for recommendations of places to eat. Go there if you can, and thank them for the recommendation. But best of all, if someone in your network is from that city, bring back copies of the local newspaper for them. It will touch them immensely, and in a way, you will share something of their history. That's a quantum leap for your relationship.

Carina told me she actually travels around the country to keep in touch with people in her network. "I'll tell them I'm in town for a deal and that I'd love to see them again. Naturally, I make sure the meeting takes place at their offices, so that not only do I keep in touch with them, but while we're there, I can be introduced to other partners they know."

See? With just a bit of strategy, your network maintenance can be easy, efficient and hassle-free. And please, do feel free to practice your note-writing on me.

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