



# PUTTING THE WORK INTO NETWORKING

Business gurus claim that *networking* has become an absolute necessity for career exposure and success. But how should one go about networking? How can networks be leveraged for an optimal outcome?

**Cherice Smith** finds out more about the value of good networking.

**T**he first step on the road to success is building a network.”

Richard Branson once wrote these wise words in an article on [www.entrepreneur.com](http://www.entrepreneur.com)\*, and being a business magnate and founder of the Virgin Group, he should know what he is talking about.

Even though the ways and means of networking have changed from Branson’s early networking days for Virgin Music in the 1970s, networking stays a life skill that helps you to build your personal brand and solve business problems, among others.

Helen Nicholson, CEO of The Networking Company, says it is important that you, as a professional, build a personal brand so that people see you as the go-to person in a specific area.

“The way to build a powerful personal brand is through your network. Your networks allow you to enhance your credibility and visibility among your target market. It’s not what you know, it’s who you know. I’d like to extend that even further to say: It’s who they know and who knows about you. If no-one knows how good you are in a specific area, then you are effectively invisible.”

Good networking is about building mutually beneficial business relationships, says Nicholson.

“Powerful networks benefit both parties and are built on a platform of authenticity. Good networking is not about the extrovert seen to be working a room, air-kissing everyone they meet while looking over people’s shoulders to see who else is more interesting in the room. The best networkers are often the introverts as they are curious and are genuinely interested in other people.”

**‘Networking is not just about gaining, it is also about giving back.’**

Nicholson says that the more diverse a network is, the more powerful it is.

“If a network comprises people who are of the same race and gender and in the same industry as you, it is not a powerful network. The more diversity you have access to, the better you will be able to navigate your career and the problems you encounter.”

It is also important to understand that

networks are built on the principles of reciprocity, says Nicholson.

“You need to give generously, often many times before you see a return on your investment. Networks also take time to build. Networking is about farming not hunting. You need to cultivate and look after relationships, rather than expect immediate returns.”

The biggest change in networking over the years has been the addition of social networks, with LinkedIn being the most important peer-to-peer professional online networking tool.

Nicholson says people should be careful of all-or-nothing thinking around the different methods of networking.

“I meet many older business people who solely do the lunches and face-to-face get-togethers while the younger Generations X and Y rely solely on their social networks. Increasingly the connected leader of the future will be comfortable in both the face-to-face world and social media platforms. LinkedIn is a very important tool to build your personal brand and become the go-to person in your networks. Facebook is still more for personal use and Twitter is an important news and commentary sharing



LEFT TO RIGHT: Helen Nicholson, CEO of The Networking Company, Dr Marelize Terblanche-Smit, head of USB's MBA programme, Edith Kennedy, manager: Stakeholder Relations at USB and Jim Siro, USB MBA alumnus and managing partner and founder of Momura Consult in Kenya.

site. The biggest issue is that people need to learn how to use these effectively, so we now run workshops, teaching people how to do this."

Networking skills are critical to business success and is often an important reason to choose an MBA as it forms an integral part of this programme, says Dr Marelize Terblanche-Smit, head of the University of Stellenbosch Business School's MBA programme.

"A good network takes time to establish and has to be nurtured. It is also important to have clear objectives for networking, and these can include new opportunities, industry knowledge or employment opportunities. During the MBA, students build and broaden their networks and relationships. Soft skills such as communication skills, adaptability, flexibility and self-awareness, which improve networking skills, are taught on the programme."

Dr Terblanche-Smit says networking today is the key to career success, since employers are increasingly looking at social networks and referrals for recruitment.

"Well-networked individuals are highly employable. We expose MBA students to powerful networking contacts via invited corporate speakers and we also encourage students to network and have discussions with alumni via the USB Alumni Association. The importance of the Alumni Association and its international reach will continue to be a key networking opportunity."

Edith Kennedy, manager: Stakeholder Relations at USB, says graduates can tap into a variety of people from different disciplines across the world who are

all at senior and executive levels in their organisations through the USB Alumni Association.

"The USB Alumni Association offers graduates the opportunity to enhance their careers through networking by making connections in the industry in which they work or want to work. Each regional committee of the USB Alumni Association also conducts activities where alumni can network and gain continuous learning.

"For example, the Western Cape Committee holds a monthly Coffee Shoptalk about topics such as technology and sustainability, while the Namibia Committee hosts breakfast talks relating to finance and banking."

But networking is not just about gaining, it is also about giving back.

Kennedy says some USB Alumni Association regions tackle community projects in their areas and help non-profit organisations with strategy or business exposure, while other alumni become mentors to the School's students and participants of the USB Small Business Academy.

As Branson puts it: "Once you're a successful business leader, it's time to start championing undiscovered talent yourself.

"I get a real sense of pleasure from seeing talented people realise their ambitions and grow professionally and personally. As I've learned, in the process you gain new insights and discover fresh approaches to doing business by simply discussing how things work. After all, continuing to network means continuing to grow." <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Source: Branson, R. 2012. *Richard Branson on how to network. Hint: Early and Often.* www.entrepreneur.com.

## NETWORKING TIPS

by Helen Nicholson, CEO of The Networking Company

- Givers gain. Give generously to your network.
- Attend events otherwise you run the risk of becoming invisible.
- Deliberately cultivate diversity in your networks.
- Always have your business cards with you.
- Have a powerful elevator speech.
- Follow up, follow up, follow up.

**Q&A** Jim Siro, USB MBA alumnus and managing partner and founder of Momura Consult in Kenya

### Why do you network?

To meet people, share views and make my work known.

### How has networking helped you?

It has helped me to generate business, widen my circle of contacts and gain greater knowledge of various industries and businesses, which helps my business.

### Do you use the USB Alumni Association for networking?

Yes. It helps me to gain an understanding of different industries and corporate functions, and also information on what is trending in these fields. I also generate enquiries about consulting via alumni. The USB Alumni Association creates a discussion platform both formally and informally, and also helps with sharing ideas on how to improve business.

### Why would you recommend networking?

It is one of the easiest ways to gain contacts and share views. The trust level is much higher than other avenues of information. A lot of business can be generated via networking, and it is a lot of fun referring a potential client to one of my associates.

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