Networking Defined

Justice Potter Stewart’s best-known phrase resulted from his quandary over how to describe “hard-core” pornography. Unable to find a satisfactory definition, he simply declared: “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of materials I understand to be embraced. . . . But I know it when I see it.”

His sentiments are analogous to how lawyers think and feel about networking. It makes many of them squeamish. Those who don’t understand what it means often find the idea offensive.

If this is you, then you’re in for a pleasant surprise.

Glad-handing, pandering, and pushiness are neither networking skills nor prerequisites to successful networking (and are, in fact, really incompatible with it). Networkers are people who generate positive energy and demonstrate a genuine interest in talking to others. After an encounter with a good networker ends, you’re left feeling that you’ve met someone you’d like to get to know better.

That person can and should be you.

WHAT IS NETWORKING?

After almost twenty years of my studying effective networking, the following definition emerges:

**Networking is building and sustaining relationships over time to provide value to others.**

What pops out at you immediately when you see this definition?

- Is it the concept of building and sustaining relationships?
- Or, is it the perhaps surprising clause “to provide value to others”?

Networking, if it is to be successful, involves thinking about others and how you can help them. That may be a shock to you. Many people misperceive networking as a process of immediately helping oneself through a few well-placed introductions at cocktail parties, conferences, or via a friend.

Implied, but not stated, in the “building relationships” part of the definition is the time commitment necessary for effective networking. Relationships are not built in five-minute increments with handfuls of people you meet for the first time in the midst of a large gathering. Networking does not work like speed dating. Think of it as more like growing a healthy plant, which requires premium soil, lots of sunlight, a bit of plant food, and a few seasons to be nurtured. And like a charming garden in which each plant requires a slightly different assortment of nutrients and care, networking is a highly personalized style of interacting with others—learning what “nutrients” they need and what “flow- ers” appeal to you.

John Garvey observes:

“The term ‘network’ or ‘networking’ can be a gross way of describing interactions with others. What we’re really talking about is relationships. Perhaps not as close as one’s family or one’s closest friends, but even a business relationship is a type of friendship. People who are good at making friends understand how to treat people. The bigger picture is to treat the people in your network the way you treat your friends. Be involved in their lives.”

Jill Wine-Banks adds a twist to the definition:

“Networking is the natural consequence of friendship and doing a good job. Both naturally create the connections you need.”
John Mitchell offers yet another variation on the theme:

“Networking is building relationships through helping people. You can’t help someone if you don’t know what that person needs. You must ask others about themselves to learn what they need.”

Simply stated, at the heart of networking is helping others. Here’s the wonderful news: In the process of helping others, you will likely experience your own personal and professional benefits in the future.

WHAT NETWORKING IS NOT

Perhaps even more important than honing an exact definition of networking is to understand what networking is not.

Jonathan Asperger likes to point out the distinction between networking and selling:

“Networking is about identifying and meeting the needs of others to establish and enhance relationships as distinguished from selling which is about identifying and meeting the needs of others to generate income.”

Networking is not a sale; it’s a joint venture. It’s not adversarial; it’s collaborative. Unlike a sales-driven activity, the goal is NOT to generate revenue, but to help others.

WHY NETWORK?

When you picked up this book, you had certain expectations of the benefits you might receive as a result of learning more about the art of networking.

What were your networking goals?

Over years of conducting networking training sessions, I have asked the participants to articulate their understanding of why people
network—and what benefits they expect to receive from networking. Here are some of their answers:

- Increase options
- Meet people for resources
- Make connections
- Raise profile
- Make friends
- Support friends
- Create allies
- Diversify perspective
- Expand acquaintances
- Find mentors
- Learn about job opportunities
- Develop sources of information

Consider these additional reasons to network:

- Develop a network
- Create opportunities at your current job
- Gain higher professional visibility
- Solidify relationships with existing clients
- Enhance collegial relations
- Expand non-professional horizons
- Maximize career satisfaction
- Create possibilities otherwise not anticipated

Have your networking goals expanded having read these lists? If so, how?

NETWORKING AS A KEY PROFESSIONAL SKILL

Lawyers no longer enjoy the luxury of working hard and expecting career advancement as the natural reward.

Larry Marks observes:

“Networking is a baseline skill that everyone who is going to be successful must possess. Our education is formalized but not flexible
as to what we will learn. Typically we learn from a curriculum that, regardless of industry, is about ten years out of date. Our work experience serves as an umbrella over our formal education. It modifies what we have learned, creating new opportunities for learning that’s more in touch with the real world. It is through networking that we close the gap between education and where the real world begins. Because it is through networking that we learn from others.”

Bjarne Tellmann concurs on the educational value of networking:

“The focus of networking should never be ‘what can I get’ but rather enjoying the ability to learn from others. Law school provides structured learning. Networking provides organic learning. In person or online, networking triggers connections and conversations.”

Gary Luftspring reminds us to help people in all aspects of their lives, not simply in their professional world:

“When you help people with their non-legal issues you are helping them solve a personal matter—that is 100 percent more important than solving their legal problems. Networking can be as simple as sending an article on a topic you’ve discussed or connecting them to a medical specialist. Networking requires talking to people and learning what they care about and then figuring out how you can help them. It’s just fun to be friendly and helpful.”

NETWORKERS AROUND YOU

You also can think about networking in terms of that which good networkers do. John Mitchell provides a great way to think about networkers:

“A good way to understand networkers is to think about people who always have a good book or a new, trendy restaurant to recommend. They tell you about these books and dining spots because they think you will enjoy them—not to get something in return from you. That is what a networker does: gives for the joy of it without expecting something in return.”

A common trait of a good networker is being a good listener. Our ability to help another person is strongly tied to our ability to understand who they are and what they need.
Before moving to the next chapter, identify five people that you know (not necessarily friends), who you consider to be good networkers. Then identify the key traits or skills they use to assist them in being successful networkers.

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Do you share any common traits or skills with these people? If so, which ones?

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Are there skills that you want to develop to assist your networking endeavor? If so, which ones?

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