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JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

How to Network When You Can't Meet Up With People

To make business connections in the age of coronavirus, people need to go online to form relationships and nurture them. That means throwing out the old strategies

By Alexandra Samuel

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It is hard to be an effective networker when you can't shake hands, go to a conference or meet at a restaurant. But we rely on connections to generate business, fuel our professional growth—and, as we are all now reminded, to sustain our own personal well-being.

The good news is that developing and deepening relationships at this moment is still possible. You just need to rethink the way you go about it.

I know because I've done it already. Even though I was once a voracious face-to-face networker, both geography and family circumstances have meant that my past decade of networking has taken place almost entirely online. And the relationships I've developed this way have been at least as meaningful and valuable as the connections I once made at in-person gatherings.

Here are some of the strategies that have worked for me over the years—and might work for you, too.

Prioritize quality over quantity

Let's explode one myth: that networking online is about casting a wide net. Resist the illusion that you can make a ton of new contacts with all the time you're spending online. Think in terms

of quality, not quantity.

By “quality” I don’t mean looking at metrics like how many followers an influencer has. I pay attention to people whose work interests or inspires me, whose posts resonate, or whose life and professional experience gives me a fresh perspective. Conversely, I take note of people who follow me online or share my articles; a quick scan through their bio or social-media feed usually gives me a feel for whether we’ll have interests in common, in which case I make a point of following them back, or if I’m going to be in their city, suggest a meeting. (These days, I’d suggest a phone or video call instead.)

When I’m spending time on social networks, I use lists or “see first” features to focus my attention on the small number of people I find most interesting or valuable, so that I can engage with them regularly; it’s easier to form new connections by interacting with 10 people on a regular basis, rather than 100 people very occasionally. I aggressively unsubscribe from email lists so that the emails I get from colleagues and friends don’t get lost. I comment and reply to posts from the same people, over and over, so it feels like we’re actually in one long conversation.

Many of these relationships ultimately pay professional dividends. I’ve found clients, speaking opportunities, new writing outlets and valued employees just through the relationships I sustained entirely out of affection, with no endgame in mind.

Network in a way that feels true to who you are

Are people wowed by your intellect? Think about how to share digestible nuggets of that brilliance in online posts or updates. If your brain power typically comes to light in the discussion after a meaty talk or lecture, look for virtual events focused around a thought leader, where there is plenty of opportunity for peer-to-peer conversation or Q&A.

Do you win people with warmth and charm? Focus on making individual, personal connections before you scale up to large-group interactions. If you’re at your best when you’re one on one, skip online events and groups, and reach out directly to the people you want to meet, asking for a video or phone date so that you can connect on a topic of mutual interest.

Or are you someone who wows with a glamorous, oversized presence? Then you’re among the handful who can’t afford to embrace this new lifestyle of sweatshirts and chaotic kitchen backdrops; instead, you’ll need to dial up the star power so that it comes through even on your one-to-one video calls.

This principle extends to how you build relationships once you’ve nailed the intro. If you’re the kind of person who usually works your way through a cocktail party or networking lunch by introducing various sets of people, you can pursue that same strategy in the online world. (Just make sure you ask both parties before making that email introduction.)

If you're famous for being a great listener, remember that you can listen to people without being in the same room: Reach out to people with phone calls, just to find out how they're doing, or "listen" online by resharing other people's posts and updates, annotated with your own thoughtful comments so it's clear that you're really engaging with what they have to say.

And if you prefer to build relationships through recurring gatherings, like monthly networking lunches, you can look for standing social-media chats that take place at a regularly scheduled date and time, and make a point of participating on a continuing basis. You might begin with the online groups/channels/hashtags that connect with your favorite offline networking groups; that way you're building on top of existing relationships.

Amplify other people

It is easy for online networking to feel like a bunch of people shouting for attention—which is why you will stand out if you're amplifying other people's voices instead of just competing to be heard. Share what other people have said, maybe adding a comment of your own, and make that at least half of what you share. It will make you more appealing to engage with, too.

This approach is also a good way to engage with a famous or influential leader or colleague. One of the things that's really amazing about social media is that you may actually get to know the people who inspire you. Try resharing an article by a business leader you admire, with some reflections on what their work has meant to you, and why you admire them. Just keep that kind of thing to an occasional indulgence: There is nothing more off-putting than a social-media feed that makes it look like you're just tagging industry star after industry star.

As you start to follow and engage with people who have a big professional presence, you'll probably notice that generosity fuels generosity. People who share their knowledge and insights generously tend to build and engage bigger followings. So, along with amplifying others, be prepared to share your own ideas in updates, blog posts, videos and conversations.

Look for ways you can be of service

At a time when so many people are struggling financially, professionally or emotionally, cold calls or sales-y emails may come off as insensitive. You may fare better by reaching out around a community-service project.

That is what I discovered when I started a small Covid support site. I reached out to a collegial email list I've belonged to for years, and got several offers of volunteer support. I found a couple of new collaborators in people I'd previously known only as social-media friends. And the software company that generously assigned several staff members to the project saw benefits, too, like getting its software in front of a whole new group of users. None of these efforts were intended as networking plays, but the simple effort of trying to do some good brought us all together and provided tangible professional benefits.

Indeed, that desire to be of service should guide as much of your online networking as possible. Face to face, you can get away with some pretty direct requests for favors, if they're delivered with tact and charm; online, it's easy for incoming requests to feel like a siege by inbox.

Rather than thinking in terms of putting favors in the bank, think about how you can be the most helpful; the kind of person others feel grateful to know and eager to connect with. That means looking at your skills, knowledge and relationships, and thinking about where they can be uniquely valuable.

If you're a fluent techie, maybe you can put your skills to use for a person or organization who is struggling to move their work online; if you're known for your contagious calm, perhaps you can lend yourself to a high-stress team and help defuse their anxiety. Even if you normally evaluate your time by the billable hour, this is a time to allocate some pro bono hours to people, causes and organizations you care about—or to offer that help to people and organizations you would like to get to know.

Let go of the line between 'personal' and 'professional' relationships

Many of us were taught to keep things crisp and professional in the workplace, but online, all that professionalism just comes off as cold and calculating. Instead, let yourself be warmly, casually human; you'll be a lot more appealing if you seem like an actual person. And letting go of the line between "business contact" and "friend" means you'll form stronger, more durable relationships.

We are in an exceptionally emotional and connected moment, and that means that people are unusually open to expressions of affection and sincerity. Yes, you can send a note to the colleague you haven't spoken to in years, letting him know that he's on your mind as someone you're sorry you lost touch with; yes, you can write a fan letter to the star of your favorite TED Talk, telling her how she's influenced your approach to this crisis. If you can let yourself be informal and vulnerable, rather than businesslike or transactional, you're much more likely to form a human connection—one that will turn into a sincere, continuing relationship.

I've forgotten the business origins of some of my social contacts in a sea of exchanges over our parenting challenges, favorite TV shows or tech gripes. It is this mix of professional and personal interaction that makes contacts and colleagues into friends, and creates a sense of true camaraderie and affection. You might think that all my [Facebook](#) posts about child struggles or moments of personal anxiety would count against me in a professional context, but instead, it seems to have made a lot of people feel like they care for me.

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Those sincere, long-term relationships are ultimately what we're all after, as businesspeople and just as humans. If you focus your networking on maximizing business value, your would-be contacts will smell your hunger a mile away; you've got to genuinely let it go, and think instead about who you want to befriend.

Try this thought experiment: It is 12 months after the release of the Covid vaccine, and life is finally returning to normal. So you decide to throw a big party, and invite all the people who have really meant something to you during this time.

Who do you see in that room? This is the question to keep front and center as you think about what it means to build and sustain a network in the months ahead. And when this difficult period ends, you'll be able to look forward to a network full of people you know, value and trust.

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