

The Business Connector

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Networking TQM

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Creating, growing and maintaining a strong, productive network is analogous to building a business. To get people – the right people – to associate with us we need to instill in them a trust that we can fill a need they perceive they have.

Our network is truly just a business, whether we are self-employed, gainfully employed or aspiring to either. As such, an important part of growing and maintaining any business is marketing it.

So how do we market this intangible thing we call our network? How do we attract new participants to our network? And equally important, how do we keep current individuals active within it?

Harry Beckwith, in his book *Selling the Invisible* (1997, Time Warner), has some sage advice for marketing services, which would include our network: The first step to marketing any service is to fix it.

In other words, it makes little sense to promote something unless it is operating effectively. The same would hold true of our network – attempting to promote participation in our network is counterproductive if in fact we are not networking effectively.

“Now wait a minute!” everyone chimes in. “Do not imply that my networking abilities are somehow sub-standard.”

No insult intended. Consider, however, that psychologists have proven that as humans we tend to have an overinflated opinion of ourselves.

For example, as Beckwith cites, a study demonstrated that 60 percent of students rated themselves in the top 10 percent of the class.

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Given that we may just overrate ourselves, it is not too much of a stretch to conclude that perhaps our networking competence is not as polished as we might think.

Drawing a parallel from Beckwith's advice, the solution to improving our ability to network is to focus on every aspect of the process in an effort to uncover problems. Then when we find problems, we set out to correct them.

This process is strikingly similar to Total Quality Management (TQM), which has been used for years in corporate America to speed production and reduce costs. The concept behind TQM obviously has applications to any business, even our daily business of growing and developing a network.

In his book *Achieving Success Through Social Capital*, Dr. Wayne Baker addresses the notion of applying TQM to networking activities. Drawing from work of colleagues, Dr. Baker advocates a simple system whereby we can improve our network by simply tracking our networking

shortcomings. This is done by first identifying defects in our networking activities, i.e., generally not doing something we should have. These could include, but not necessarily be limited to, failing to ...

- ! Appropriately thank someone;
- ! Return a telephone call or e-mail;
- ! Introduce two individuals;
- ! Actively listen when engaged in conversation; or,
- ! Timely pursue a referral opportunity

Once we have identified a list, we simply mark a tally by each defect when we fail to do what we should have, even if only a minor infraction.

After several weeks of recording and measuring, we gain a sense as to what areas we can improve. Armed with this information about our shortcomings, we can take corrective action with respect to our networking behavior.

In addition to allowing us to take corrective action, the networking TQM actually serves to change our behavior. This is because, as Dr. Baker indicates, just knowing that we are tracking certain aspects of our behavior will have a positive impact on it. In other words, we will consciously tend to avoid committing these failures.

And maybe after all this, we determine that our networking abilities are pretty sound. Whether they are or not is irrelevant. The fact is that they are not perfect. By focusing on them, however, we cannot help but improve our networking abilities. This in turn can only serve to improve this business known as our network. ✓