

The Business Connector

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Don't Talk To Strangers

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Our youth was filled with reminders. When we got home from school, before we did anything, our parents would hit us with a "Remember to do your homework."

When we were dropped off to play at a neighbor's house or with a friend, we would hear something like, "Remember to say Please and Thank You."

When our parents would call us in for lunch or dinner, as they would welcome us through the door they would chide us to, "Remember to wash your hands before you eat."

And, of course, the most memorable reminder of all was, "Remember, don't talk to strangers!" In fact, by the time we were teenagers, that thought had been drilled into us no fewer than 1,000 times by parents, teachers and den mothers. Of course, those responsible adults around us wanted nothing more than to protect us from those who live to prey on innocence.

Fast forward 10 to 15 years and our lives are firmly entrenched in the grown-up world. For the most part, the teachings of our youth are still valid. Certainly, we must continue to be responsible with respect to our obligations. We need to maintain the appropriate use of words to show appreciation. And, hopefully, dutifully washing our hands is now a matter of habit.

However, at this point, we need to re-think the whole "Don't Talk to Strangers" mantra. While we may have a strong circle of relationships, for this network to grow and flourish we need to add to it. This implies connecting with

people we do not know. In other words, the strangers we were once forewarned about.

If we think about it, strangers are an integral part of our continued success and personal development. Few of us are able to build our businesses or expand our social horizons solely on the backs of those we already know. And even if we could, the networking process would become cumbersome and slow.

To truly advance ourselves, we need to buck the wisdom of our youth – talk to strangers. These unfamiliar people are essential to a growing, productive network. Those who we do not know today are nothing more than our friends, clients and vendors of tomorrow.

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Nothing about this suggests striking up conversations with odd individuals in seedy parts of town. It does advocate, however, that we take a risk and communicate with someone totally new.

There is tremendous value in embracing those we do not know into conversation. This naturally begs the question, "How?" Certainly, we can always opt to sit back and wait for them to approach us. The problem with this approach is two-fold. First, this does not fit with what should be our proactive style. Secondly, by sitting back we run the risk of being perceived as aloof or pretentious.

Thus, it is up to us to initiate conversation. However, again this naturally begs the question, "How?" The answer is rather simple. At least, there is no big secret or no magic formula. Gabbing with someone new is all a matter of making small talk.

Debra Fine, author of *The Fine Art of Small Talk*, says that "small talk has a bad rap as the lowly stepchild of real conversation." This is so true. Every great conversation we have ever had – especially with strangers – starts and ends with chit-chat about matters as trivial as the weather or the game.

A perfect starting point is committing to saying "hello" to everyone we come across. Eventually, we will encounter someone willing to engage in idle banter.

From here we only need to jump in with a nifty little comment-question combo. "That is a nice tie; where'd you get it?" That might be the first step in establishing rapport. Or just maybe we are better suited with something like, "This is a great event; are they all this good?" It is possible that a blaze of business will be sparked by something like, "Lots of people here; I wonder who are the real players?"

It is hard to say what the right formula is for converting a chance encounter into a lifelong friendship or a valued business colleague. What is clear is that doing nothing is not the answer.

We need to take it upon ourselves to talk to a stranger. Shhhh! Our mothers will never know. ▼