



Networking

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What is networking

Networking is communication. It is about giving and taking, sharing information, making offers, responding and mutual assistance. Networking is making the most of your contacts. But it is always two-way traffic. What it can give you is information, advice, introductions or ideas that help you towards your goal.

As soon as you are in contact with other people, you have a network. But not everyone is aware of that. Your network can be divided into 'hot' and 'cold' contacts. The hot ones are those people you really know. Those with whom you are in touch regularly, through work or in your private life: people who are easy to approach when you think that they could help you, and who find it easy to approach you. Cold contacts are people you could know better, perhaps through others. But they, too, could help with your plans. When you are networking well, it is easy to turn cold contacts into hot ones.

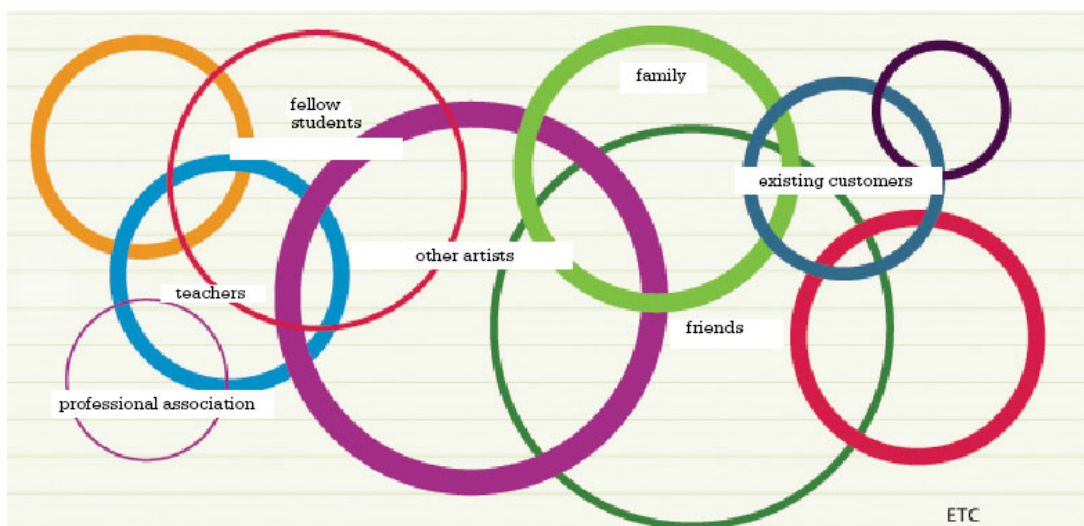


Diagram reproduced from *De Kunstenaarsplanner 09/10*, Kunstenaars&CO, 2009.

Mapping your own network

Networks frequently overlap. Personal contacts can become business ones, and vice versa. Some people are in positions where they can make decisions that are important to you, whereas others are primarily a source of information. In many cases, it may not be immediately apparent what exactly somebody could mean for you. But long-term investments in such contacts sometimes pay big dividends. If you are not particularly conscious of your own network, use the diagram above to help you understand it.

Making the right contacts

People in your network will, in their turn, know other people who could be important to you. Exploiting that will help you to extend your own network. In everyday life, you regularly make new contacts through family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances, at parties and in cafés. Talk informally about your work when you have the chance and over time your network will expand naturally.



You can also approach network-building in a more focused way, by seeking out places where you will meet useful new contacts: premières, openings, presentations, the internet and companies for which you work. Or join an artists' association, a collective or a professional society. A work placement is a good way to start building a network in the business world. And stay in touch with your fellow students from college.

If you want to make the most efficient use of your network of contacts in order to help you realize a certain project, you should start with your 'warm' contacts. Think long and hard about who can help you or who might be able to bring you into contact with people who could play an important part in the project in question. Let as many people as possible, both business and personal acquaintances, know about what you are working on, and what you still require in order to achieve it.

Networking in practice

Make yourself visible. Establish the right contacts and maintain them carefully. If you need them, they will – spontaneously or when asked – give you tips and advice or put you in touch with the right people at the right time. If other people know you and know exactly what you want or stand for, they will be more likely to approach you. And use your own network to help others: that can sometimes create a 'boomerang' effect.

A good networker is always feeling out opportunities, but never asks for a job or commission straight away! Even if that is what you are really after, try not to be too pushy. You are more likely to be successful if you invite people to think with you. Your own input into a discussion will probably be more relaxed if you are not explicitly trying to sell yourself. Most people enjoy giving information and advice informally. Go straight for the job, commission or money and you are likely to be seen as threatening. The other person will have to turn you down and disappoint you – from which point the conversation takes on a much more negative tone. A spontaneous discussion leads you naturally into a stronger position. You can ask somebody explicitly for advice, though.

Networking conversations

Sometimes you will find yourself by chance in a conversation which, with hindsight, you could describe as 'networking'. And sometimes that is what you consciously go for. But in all your conversations, seek the common ground: shared interests or professional knowledge. Show interest in the person you are talking to. That makes for a more pleasant experience. Active listening is also important. Ask open questions, follow up answers, summarize what has been said from time to time, refrain from interrupting and show that you are listening attentively. Let people know why you think that you can help them.

Spontaneous networking conversations during chance meetings are not usually that structured. But if you approach somebody deliberately, try to take the following steps.

1. First contacts generally start off informally. Begin with small talk.
2. If necessary, the formal introduction comes next. Know who you are talking to and introduce yourself.
3. If you arranged the meeting in advance, explain the reason for it.
4. Try to ask clear questions and follow them up if you think that the other person could provide more information.
5. Make agreements. These could be very specific or quite general. For example, you could agree that you will call again next week or simply that you will keep the other person informed. Do not forget to exchange business cards if you have fallen into conversation with somebody you do not know.
6. At the end, thank the other person for the conversation or their advice.

Networking step by step

Expanding your network is easiest when you do it in a natural way, by displaying your own enthusiasm or professionalism at appropriate moments or when somebody brings you to the attention of someone else. If you want to approach networking in a more purposeful way, you should view it as a step-by-step process.



Step 1. Information

Whether you fall into a conversation spontaneously or have arranged a more formal meeting, you always exchange information with the person you are talking to. This reveals details of your own prospects and the current state of your market.

Always be as presentable as possible and prepare yourself in advance. You can prepare an elevator pitch, that a one minute presentation of your skills, who you are and what you want. If you are going to a meeting, do not forget to take your business cards with you. If you already know who you want to meet, make sure that you know what they are working on at the moment. If you have trouble initiating conversations, consider roughly what it is that you want to say.

Step 2. Advice

Rather than just expounding, ask the person with whom you are talking questions so that they think about what you are discussing. You may be able to make use of the advice they give.

Step 3. Introductions

The easiest way to reach a 'cold' contact is to be introduced by somebody else. If a third person promises to arrange an introduction, you suddenly cease to be a complete stranger. Certainly if that person is part of your 'hot' network, this can ease the initial contact considerably. If somebody you are talking to does not make suggestions spontaneously, you can ask for them. You can also ask a question that that person does not know the answer to, in which case they will often know somebody who does have it.

Step 4. Suggestions

If the person you are talking to cannot help you directly or introduce you to people who can, they may still be able to suggest somebody else without directly facilitating the contact. At least then you know who to approach, even though you have to make contact yourself.

Above all, effective networking is hard work. But as well as increasing your chances of bringing together the right people, you also learn a lot from these conversations. They provide you with specific information, enhance your conversational skills and help crystallize your own ideas about your projects. Never underestimate how much time you need to put into this kind of active networking, though.

Maintaining contacts

Even when you have reached your goal, keep your network 'hot'. Remain visible. You may need the same people again in the future, or they may need you. Again, maintaining contacts works best when it occurs naturally. There is no point in going through a list of people to call every month when you have no news, questions or other specific reason for contacting them.

After any conversation, let the other person know what you have done with the tips, advice or suggestions they have given you. Keep people abreast of how your plans are progressing. Staying in touch with your contacts is important, even if it is only in simple ways: accepting invitations, congratulating somebody on their production, responding to a review, forwarding an article about something you know they are interested in, meeting up for a drink occasionally or attending their show. And none of this has to take up a lot of your time: e-mail is a good and quick way to keep in personal contact.

There is also a practical side to maintaining a network. Some people have an address book full of contacts and manage to remember exactly who is doing what and what their interests are. Others need a more comprehensive system to keep track of important information. You could record details in a simple card-index system or on a computer database. Or keep business cards and write on them how you met that person and what you think they could do for you. But do not make things too complicated: networking is a means, not an end.



More information

On Beroepkunstenaar.nl:

- *Skills*
 - *Negotiations*
 - *Presentation*
 - *Example job application*
 - *Writing a curriculum vitae*
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- *Professional Networking for Dummies* by Donna Fisher (Hungry Minds Inc., ISBN 0764553461).