

The Three Circles of Networking By Brian Fons

Effective networking requires an awareness of how you fit into a conversation, situation, or relationship. For example, when speaking to someone you just met, it may not seem appropriate to ask overly personal questions. Conversely, if you see someone on a regular basis and know them well, you can skip many of the pleasantries that you normally exchange with someone new. I have found that my network of people tends to form three circles. Each of these three circles has a different value to me and none of them should be ignored.

The outermost circle consists of the people you barely know or are just meeting for the first time. When you first join an organization or go to a “networking event” run by a chamber of commerce or other business organization, you are likely to find some people in this outermost circle. The discussion usually revolves around your business or profession and the goal seems to be to see if you can use each other’s services or know of someone who can. The likelihood of a successful “hit” is pretty low but not impossible. Sometimes you get lucky. If your goal is to get a sale the first time you meet someone, it will be a pretty tough road and you may find yourself spinning your wheels.

The middle circle of people consists of the people you have seen several times or on a regular basis at, for example, a chamber of commerce committee meeting that meets monthly. These people have a pretty good idea of what you do for a living and are usually more than willing to refer friends to you if asked or will hire you for your services if they need them. As long as you create a positive impression on these people, they can be good referral sources for a long time. They can also be great resources for you or your business if you need help or have a question outside of your area of expertise. You can learn a lot from these people. Don’t be afraid to ask them for a favor if you need it.

The inner circle of your network consists of the people who actively try to help you. They can be close friends, family, or business acquaintances who have made an effort to get to know you better and act as your sales force. The people who fall in this inner circle are the most valuable to your business. It takes a long time to cultivate that type of relationship. Once you have established trust and confidence and brought someone into this inner circle, don’t let them go. They will be valuable to you in many ways, including helping you grow your business.

While you will usually find it easier and more enjoyable to spend time with people in the inner circle, it is critical that you go out and meet people to keep the outer circle full. Everybody you know started out in the outermost circle. The middle circle is very fragile. The people hanging out here can jump into the inner circle or fade away, depending on how you treat them. Don’t ignore them or you will find that your inner circle will not grow. Good luck building your circles!

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