

Freelance Bootcamp Networking and Mentorship Report

A mentor can change your freelance career. Access to their experience, wisdom, and insight can be the difference between struggling for months or succeeding in days.

But if you want to find a great mentor, then you need to become comfortable with networking and the idea of networking makes many people uncomfortable ... or confused.

It's easy to see why.

When most people think about networking it seems insincere at best — and selfish at worst. This, of course, is the complete opposite of what networking is supposed to be — friendly, useful, and genuine.

It's easy for most of us to be friendly and useful with people we know. However, because networking is a “business activity” it's easy to think that we need to act in a different way.

Unfortunately, most networking strategies come across as pushy, needy, or self-serving — even though the people using them rarely act that way in day-to-day life.

Don't worry, there are definitely genuine ways to self-promote. So, in the spirit of helping everyone become a better networker, here are 20 networking tips, which from my experience, actually work.

The real goal of networking

1. The goal of networking should be to help other people. Yes, it would be nice if they helped you out as well, but networking is a two-way street. And your side of the street is all about helping others, not asking them to help you. Asking for favors should only become a possibility once you have learned more about the person and provided some value to them.

2. It's far more important to understand their needs before you tell them about your needs. Your goals should not be on the forefront of your mind. You're trying to develop a relationship with someone, which means you should be thinking about them. It's your job to understand the people in your network, where they are coming from, and what's important to them.

Setting expectations

3. You don't need to know the most people, just the right people. There is no need to shotgun your business cards across the industry or to pepper everyone with emails. Instead, focus on finding people that are relevant to you. As time goes on, you can decide if the interests that you share with someone are worth pursuing further. It's better to have 5 people willing to help you out than it is to have 500 that simply know your name.

4. Don't expect anything. The fact that you reached out and made contact with someone does not put them in your debt. No one is required to "pay you back." Instead of approaching networking with the goal of gaining favors, try reaching out with curiosity. Contact interesting and relevant people and see what happens. Some of them will respond and some of the won't. Learn about the people that follow up. Find out what makes them interesting and how you can help them — and don't expect anything in return.

5. Don't leave networking to chance. Take some time and define what you are looking for in your network. Every once and awhile you'll stumble across someone amazing on accident, but it's a lot easier to find who you're looking for if you know who they are in the first place. Be proactive and create a list of people that you want to contact on purpose.

6. Go beyond your industry. Connect with people on a variety of levels from a wide range of areas. By growing your network outside of the usual areas you will be more valuable to people that are in your immediate industry. The people you work with have personalities and multiple interests, right? With a broad network you can be the person that connects people across industries.

7. Don't dismiss anyone as irrelevant. Maybe you don't think a local blogger would be a good contact because you work at a medical practice. However, when you open a new branch and you want to let people know about it, you'll be glad you reached out to someone with an audience.

How to reach out to someone new

8. Quantify how much time you're going to take. People are busy and when someone new starts talking to them, the first thing that comes to their mind is "How long is this person going to talk to me?" or "How much time is this going to take?"

Address those concerns from the start by saying something like, “Hi. I have one item that I’d like to briefly discuss with you. It should only take two minutes. Do you have time now?” Asking questions like this not only shows that you respect their time, it also gives you the option of speaking with them later if they are too busy now.

9. Start by offering praise, not requesting help. Unless you have a mutual contact that is putting you in touch for a specific reason, it’s best to avoid asking for anything when you meet for the first time. Don’t ask for favors, for promotion, for advice, or even to meet up for lunch or coffee. Simply start by offering a short compliment. After they respond to this initial contact, you can begin moving things towards a more lengthy meeting.

10. Keep your emails short. If your first contact is via email, then split the message into smaller segments. Instead of reaching out to someone new with a long-winded, five paragraph explanation of why you are contacting them, use that first email to focus on a small bit of praise. You can send further details to them after they reply. Keep that first message friendly and short.

How to build the relationship

11. Try to provide as much value as you possibly can. The more value you create, the more it will come back to you many times over. Focus all of your networking efforts on helping the people you contact.

12. Start by focusing on being friendly and helpful. This is the number one tactic you can use to build your network. Simply spread information in a friendly and helpful way. Did you read a book that someone in your network will enjoy? Tell them about it or send them a copy. Are you using something that would help a friend with a project they are working on? Email it to them. Hear a new music album that a someone might enjoy? Send it their way. Building your network is the same as building friends. Be interested in what they are doing and offer friendly suggestions when you can.

13. Develop the habit of introducing people. Connecting like-minded people is a powerful to enhance your network. The idea of doing this seems foreign to many people, but it is actually quite easy. Do you know two people who enjoy reading the same type of books? Or like the same sports teams? Or love reading about history? Or work in the same industry? You get the point. Don’t make it hard, just introduce the two of them by sharing their common

interest. They can decide if they want to pursue the relationship further.

14. Nurture your current network. Most people think of networking as reaching out to new people, but don't forget about the network that you already have. (Hint: You probably call them your friends and co-workers.) There is no need to wait to meet new people to start connecting others or sharing useful information. Network within the groups that are already close by.

Making networking a habit

15. Don't take "No," personally. Everyone is busy. For most people, it's simply a matter of timing. If you catch them on a good day, then they will happily talk or meet with you. If they're swamped, however, then a simple "No" might be all that you get. Don't take it to heart. In most cases, it's not a reflection of you or what you said.

16. Make it a point to follow up. One or two days after meeting someone for the first time, follow up with a brief email or note. This is an opportunity to develop the relationship by bringing up a topic that you discussed before or making a comment on an interesting topic. Following up with relevant conversation helps to anchor your previous interaction in their mind and displays more personality than just sending a message that says, "Thanks for talking!"

17. Did you fail? Try reaching out in a different way. You don't want to pester anyone, but if you give them a few weeks and don't hear a response, then there is nothing wrong with being persistent. For example, dropping in to talk face to face has resulted in great conversations with people that previously ignored my emails. Sometimes switching it up is all you need to do.

Things to remember

18. Network with the intention of helping other people, not yourself. People enjoy doing business with those that they trust and like. The only way to build that trust is to engage with others in a helpful way. Yes, trust takes a long time to build, but insincerity takes even longer to overcome. Once you've developed a relationship and created a bond, then you can move on to negotiating for favors and asking for help.

19. Networking is more about listening to what people say than saying

the right things. Take the time to listen to people's stories. You can only provide something of value to them if you listen to who they are and what they do.

20. Sometimes the best networking opportunities involve real work.

Volunteer for events, committees, or projects that will have interesting people at them — or better — working for them. Working on a project or task with someone is one of the best ways to develop a relationship. For example, volunteering for a non-profit can be a great way to get to know their influential board members.

Follow these networking tips and you should be developing new relationships in no time.

Once these relationships start to build you will naturally develop a closer connection to some people. Use this opportunity to ask one of your closer connections to mentor you as you start your freelance career.

Good luck!

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