The Basics Of Good Networking

In lots of professional circles "networking" has come to be regarded as a necessary skill that leads to new jobs and new customers. I prefer to regard it as an enjoyable social practice that enriches my life. Therein, I believe, lies the difference between bad networking and good networking.

Have you ever had an old contact call you when he's job hunting? Suddenly an otherwise casual, friendly person turns into a preoccupied motor-mouth who makes you wish you'd let voicemail take the call. That's an example of bad networking.

"Networking" is an unfortunate term because it implies connections but ignores the importance of true relationships. Networking isn't about the quantity of contacts you make; it's about the quality of relationships you enjoy.

Let's take a look at what's wrong with the conventional notions of networking practices so we can come up with a simple approach to good networking.

Don't speculate for a job.

The way lots of people "network for a job" reminds me of day-trading in the stock market. The networker has no interest in the people or companies he's "investing" in. He just wants a quick profit. He skims the surface of an industry or profession, trying to find easy contacts that might pay off quickly. This is what networking meetings (or so-called "business card exchanges") are usually all about.

When you encounter an experienced networker, you'll find that he listens carefully to the useful information you give him, but once you're done helping, he's not interested in you any more. He might drop some tidbits your way, but don't expect him to remember you next week.

Invest in relationships.

Contrast this to someone who reads about your company and calls to
discuss how you applied an old technology to produce new results. He's interested in your work and stays in touch with you, perhaps sending an article about a related topic after you've talked. This initial contact might prompt you to one day call your newfound friend for advice, or to visit his company's booth at the next trade show and introduce yourself. Maybe it never goes beyond that, or maybe one day you'll work together. The point is, after a time you become known entities to one another. You become members of one another's circle. You'll help one another because you're friends, not because "it will pay off later".

Belong.

People trust other people they know. Why? Because "getting to know you" takes a long time. This approach to business reveals integrity and it reveals patience. People who have made that kind of investment in you are usually worthy of your trust. They're the kinds of people who can refer their buddies to you -- and you're glad to make the new acquaintance, because you are all part of the same circle.

People in your circle are people you would hire or go to work for. If there's a catch to this, it's that you have to invest in getting to know them first. That's what makes a really good network of people so difficult to become a part of. It's also what makes it so desirable to belong to.