

Networking holds the key

By Brendan Dorrian, chief executive officer, Global Retail Network

IN THE 21ST CENTURY IT'S NO LONGER ABOUT WHOM YOU KNOW, BUT WHO THEY KNOW, AND CAN THEY CONNECT YOU? NETWORKING IS A CURRENCY, AND JUST LIKE MONEY, YOUR NETWORK SHOULD BE SAVED, INVESTED, AUDITED AND, ABOVE ALL, VALUED.

→ In my experience, business successes will always be mirrored by successful networking. Moreover, successful networking, with a common bond of strong relationships, accelerates professional and personal growth strategies.

This article addresses professional networking and sets out ten very simple steps to creating a world-class network, which everyone can adopt, today. I first created my network in 2002, in a restaurant in London; it was made up of six others, all male, who lived and worked in the UK. And now, my network is multi-national, multi-disciplined, multi-cultural and multi-faceted.

STEP 1: WRITE DOWN WHO IS IN YOUR NETWORK.

Imagine yourself as an airline, with a central hub servicing many destinations, and code share partners servicing many more, usually those that that you can't reach. This is an allegory for your network: You are the airline, and the hub is your network; the destinations you service are those people whom you know, and code share partners are those you know, who are well networked, and who can connect you with those that you don't. To be sure, everyone knows someone else, but you'll quickly recognise those who also see themselves as a hub.

My network has five simple categories: They are retailers, franchisees, vendors, licensors, and friends.

1. **Retailers:** Those whose business it is to manage a retail portfolio
2. **Franchisees:** Those who franchise retail brands
3. **Vendors:** Those who supply products or services to retailers
4. **Licensors:** Those who license brands that do not have managed retail portfolios
5. **Friends:** Those who are unconnected with my professional work

As the Global Retail Network, these are the best categories for our business. Find a set of categories that works for you and your business and be ready to amend them as your network evolves. Finally, your categories should be unambiguous, complimentary and easy to remember.

STEP 2: CREATE AND SAFEGUARD YOUR DATABASE

You are creating a data; however, don't confuse your database with a network. Your database merely records the relevant information about those in your network. This is pure administration, but it's administration, which is relevant and important. Whatever information is stored within your address book should be duplicated on a spreadsheet, which makes it easier to filter and to analyse. Your spreadsheet will enable you to sort data using the categories relevant for your business.

Safeguarding your data is essential and you should keep at least two separate copies, in addition to the backup run on your computer. Moreover, decide carefully with whom you'll trust the contents of your network.

STEP 3: UPDATE YOUR NETWORK

Managing your data is important: Amend the data whenever someone changes a role, a phone number; do all that you can to keep your data clean and free of false data. Whatever categories you select, ensure that you add a date column to your spreadsheet; use this to record the month and year in which you meet someone; you'll be surprised how useful this will become in the future.

STEP 4: COMMUNICATE REGULARLY

Your network should be an active and dynamic tool; an extension of your professional life. Find reasons to communicate with those around you on a regular basis: share information and anecdotes; send people useful

articles and invitations to forthcoming events using every means available. SMS, email, telephone, and remember the most powerful of all, a hand written letter. There's nothing more compelling, or memorable, than ink on paper no matter how bad you believe your handwriting to be. That's not the point. The point is that it's rarely done, people just don't write letters any more, and those that do, get noticed. Try this: send a letter to 10 people whom you've not seen for perhaps three months. I guarantee that every one of them will call or email within a day of receiving your letter, probably to ask you how you're getting on and to invite you for a meeting.

STEP 5: SAY 'HELLO'

When was the last time you said hello to a stranger? In certain circumstances, it's exactly the right thing to do. At conferences, in the canteen within big corporations, or when you see someone reading an industry publication, go over and say hello. Conferences especially are ideal opportunities to expand your network and you should be prepared to devote

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the equivalent time of one conference session to meeting strangers. In my experience, those with other than an ordinary appearance are often the most interesting and subsequently become the most communicative.

And when you say your name, say it twice. When you say 'My name is Brendan, Brendan Dorrian' you assist the listener to tune into what you're telling them, and to remember what you've told them.

STEP 6: PRACTICE YOUR ELEVATOR PITCH

An essential skill for every networker is a) How to say who you are and what you do, inside ten seconds, while making it interesting, and b) Ascertaining in what way the stranger in front of you is useful to your business, or not, inside a maximum of three short questions. Combined with Step 5, use and control this quick-fire exchange to grow your network and use your time, quickly and effectively.

STEP 7: REFER YOUR NETWORK

How do you refer, appropriately and safely? In your network you are the hub, and you can reach others through referral; the natural concomitant to this is that in everyone else's network, you are one of those referring. Firstly, be willing to share your network with others because it will propagate a referral from them.

We advise following a simple process when asked to make a referral, not least of all because some countries, such as the UK, have strict rules regarding data protection. We recommend getting permission of the person you already know, 'John' to send their contact details to the person that they want to be in touch with, 'Susan'; then, send John's contact details to Susan, explaining that John's details are included and that he'd like to be in touch. This way, John gets his message across, Susan protects her privacy and you get to do a good thing.

STEP 8: NETWORK ONLINE

Online networking can be done just as badly as it can be done well; this is a global platform, which should be used to the best effect. We recommend LinkedIn as the best online networking tool for professionals. We equally recommend avoiding all personal, non business, sites if you want your private life to

remain private. And, if you'd like to connect with the writer, go to <http://www.linkedin.com/in/brendandorrian>

Remember though that online networking enables others to find you, to make contact; nothing replaces the sight and sound of the human voice.

STEP 9: YOU ARE A BRAND

Protect your identity and maximise the opportunity for others to find you, by registering your name as a URL. Then, create a home page with whatever contact and biographical details are relevant. These are an inexpensive and highly effective networking tool, and if you live in a country with many common names, do it now.

STEP 10: ALWAYS CARRY BUSINESS CARDS

Need we say more?

