

## Preparing For Professional Relationship Building

Our modern modes of communication are rapidly evolving. For instance, online social networking is influencing our daily communication with friends, family and coworkers, and its power and scope is still expanding. Amazingly, it is empowering political movements<sup>1</sup> and even helping solve crimes.<sup>2</sup> Despite this communication revolution, the process of developing meaningful relationships with colleagues, employers and employees is as challenging as ever before. While digital “friends” are only a click away, making a lasting professional impression often requires physical legwork.

Many of us shy away from professional networking. As musicians, some of us believe we are too busy with more important facets of our careers. We might dismiss networking as “schmoozing” and think it is only for the stereotypically insincere salesman. While this might be true in some

cases, it is human nature to rely on people we know and on recommendations from others when we search for services. Therefore, a healthy network of contacts is a must for a successful music career. When I first considered incorporating the topic of networking into my pedagogy curriculum, I spent some time considering the professional opportunities I have enjoyed that were the result of previously formed relationships. Unsurprisingly, *all* of my most significant opportunities were influenced by recommendations from professional contacts.

Even though the benefits of networking are obvious, the process of meeting new people, establishing regular contact and building meaningful relationships, is consistently challenging. Nevertheless, if we become genuinely fascinated with people, networking transforms into an appealing activity. This life-coachey statement sounds trite but it deserves consideration. We lead busy, self-centered lives. There is nothing inherently wrong with that fact—it comes from human nature coupled with societal demands—but the influence of people around us enriches our daily experiences. If we take this concept into our networking endeavors, our personal interactions become interesting and meaningful.

Musicians are quite fortunate to engage potential contacts in many different venues. As students, we engage classmates, teachers and administrators. As teachers, we meet the parents

and the friends of our students. As professionals, there are countless other occasions where we meet new and interesting people: concerts, conferences, teacher association meetings, summer camps, fundraisers and the list goes on and on. Even seemingly non-professional meeting places like airports or sporting events provide great places to make new contacts. Of course, finding people is the easy part. The challenge lies in engaging them in interesting ways.

Personally, the most difficult part about preparing for networking is defining my networking goal. Unlike a salesman looking for a buying customer, I could be talking with someone with whom I can foresee no immediate type of business exchange. Nevertheless, we are building relationships for the future. We need references when we need them, not after we realize there is a need. Also, the nature of networking is that each contact we make has countless other contacts in need of our services or we know of someone in need of their services. Therefore, our initial aim in building a new professional relationship should be to market ourselves accurately and effectively.

During an initial meeting, in order to stand out from the competition, we need to be prepared to give a fascinating, but short, description of our skills and goals. Career advisors call this type of brief introduction an elevator speech—a statement short enough to give between floors on an elevator and

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that will help potential contacts know who we are, what we do and describe the problems we can solve. This is a speech we must refine and rehearse so our self-description feels natural and effortless. I find myself preparing elevator speeches differently depending upon my audience. For instance, if I were meeting concertgoers at a symphony performance, my speech is quite different than what I might give at a music educators conference. When meeting people at concerts, the recitation of my job position title (assistant professor of piano pedagogy) is often met with puzzled stares. In the case of non-musicians, a descriptive introduction works wonders. Here is one possible conversation segment that explains my mission as a peda-

gogy teacher: "You know how a lot of people quit piano lessons when they are young and then regret it later in life? In my university teaching and research, I try to help pianists become more effective teachers so that their own students will keep playing piano for their entire lives."

A narrow and focused statement like this often opens up new lines of conversation. Most importantly, we should avoid simple labels that conjure up stereotypical images within our contact's mind. If I ask, "What do you do?" and you reply, "I'm a piano teacher," my mental image of your services is immediately defined. Regardless of whether that definition is positive or negative, you have missed your opportunity to inspire me

about your line of work. This is true of simple statements about many job titles—for example doctors, lawyers and accountants.

Once we are prepared to describe ourselves effectively, we should give thought to how we will actually begin conversations. If we are at a professional event, like a music teachers association meeting or a conference, starting conversations is much simpler than casual encounters in hotel lobbies or airports. Regardless of the situation, if we show genuine interest in others the conversation should flow smoothly. Of course, while cliché conversation starters, like comments about a restaurant's service or complimenting a fashion accessory, seem uninspiring, they break the ice in a comfortable and

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familiar way. After we begin a casual conversation we can then start to distinguish ourselves. We also have to be sensitive to the person's level of responsiveness. Does their body language indicate that they are enthusiastically engaged? If we become annoying, all of our preparation to make a good impression will be in vain.

A solid first impression will also help make a person feel comfortable with the flow of the conversation. This impression depends upon our friendly manner, but it also includes the way we dress. I am likely to step on many toes here by making comments about fashion choices, but the simple fact is that our appearance matters. In a utopian world, our personal and pro-

fessional value would be judged only by our actions and abilities, but we live in a fast-paced world in which our future contacts do not have the time to explore the vast depths of our potential during initial meetings. Like our conversation starters, the first impression given by our appearance should make a person feel comfortable. As young professionals, this is particularly important since it is often an interpretation of maturity. I remember that as a young graduate teaching assistant my style of dress had a profound effect on my students' reactions to my teaching.

In preparing to begin new professional relationships, we should also consider, "Does the concept of meeting complete strangers who may or

may not be interested in talking with you sound intimidating?" It does to me! This is where we can enjoy the advantages we gain as musicians—we are masters at dealing with performance anxiety, and all of the strategies that we use in music performance help with the anxiety we face in networking scenarios. Whether it is practicing our elevator speech aloud, using imagery to mentally rehearse meetings, or planning our positive self-talk, we should prepare for networking as we would prepare for major recital performances.

After an initial meeting with a business contact, we must follow up in order to turn a random and inconsequential meeting into a helpful business relationship. The simplest way to

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do this is by e-mail. Our first e-mail letter can be as casual as a note stating that it was "nice to make a new acquaintance" or as formal as a short introduction—perhaps including a biographical sketch and abbreviated resume/vita. Depending upon the nature of our contact's business and profile, it might be difficult to find an e-mail address online. We should be sure to exchange contact information during the original meeting. Business cards are an effective and easy way to exchange this information, or fellow Smartphone users can even swap contact information wirelessly between devices. Following up with new contacts can be time consuming work. After conferences and major meetings, I try to add time into my schedule to

sit down and e-mail new contacts I have made.

There is no shortage to systematic networking guides in print and online. A great basic introduction is Diane Darling's book, *The Networking Survival Guide: Get the Success You Want by Tapping into the People You Know*.<sup>3</sup> Also remember that the basic tenets of effective music teaching—preparation, presentation and follow-through—will serve us just as well in building professional relationships. If we prepare our introductions, make good first impressions and then follow up on initial contacts, we will likely enjoy many professional opportunities in our careers. ✍

## Notes

1. "Libya Protests: Al-Bayda security chief 'sacked.'" *BBC News* 17 February 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12490504> (accessed March 8, 2011).

2. Lim, Louisa. "In China, Dad uses social media to find missing boy." *NPR* 10 February 2011. <http://www.npr.org/2011/02/10/133644822/Chinas-Social-Media-Help-To-Rescue-Abducted-Boy> (accessed March 8, 2011).

3. Darling, Diane. *The Networking Survival Guide: Get the Success You Want by Tapping into the People You Know* (New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2003).



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