

How to build a professional network

In this second article on networking, **Darrin Baines** and **Catherine Hale** look at the networking process and skills required to ensure success

To network professionally is to seek out new people systematically and cultivate relationships to achieve professional goals. Many people are reluctant to try networking because they associate it with sycophancy, nepotism and politics. Others think that their time would be better spent getting “real work” done. Indeed, most people who network do not like to admit that they have worked-out ideas about it. What these people need to understand is that networking is really about building a community.

Those who do not learn to network are less likely to be successful. Keeping up to date with the people in your community will help you in many ways, from getting a job to finding out why you seem to be getting nowhere with your primary care trust or local health board. For pharmacists in academia, although networking cannot replace good research, it can gain you recognition for your accomplishments and can open doors.

Networking process

Some people seem to be natural networkers. But have you ever wondered what it is that these people do to make them good at it? There are four steps to successful networking: knowing what you want, identifying relevant people, making contact and following up.

Work out what you want Whether you want advice on implementing a new service, to be invited to a conference overseas or funding, you need to be focused. If you know what you want, you will know which network to join. Often you will need to create your own network rather than join an existing one. If you need to create your own network, think about the spokes and hub of a wheel. Ideally, you want to make yourself the hub and other people the spokes.

Make sure you can say what you care about and why. If you can do this, you can build a network of people who care about the same thing. A useful exercise is to practise 10-second, one-minute and two-minute explanations.

Identify relevant people You need to identify a network or choose people for your network. Once you have done this, you need to decide which people are likely to act as nodes and opinion leaders (see *PJ*, 14 August, 222). For example, hospital pharmacists should think about who influences ward policies. By gaining the support of the influencers in your target network you will be

accepted quickly. You also need to work out which people might be sympathetic to your cause. And because communication is a two way street, consider who might have a mutual interest in you making contact. For example, if you cite someone's work in a paper, you should intend to add him or her to your network.

Your aim is to compile a list of potential people to network with. There are many ways to identify relevant people. For example:

- Ask other people with good networks
- Make a habit of reading articles (or papers) on your topic and scanning bibliographies
- Pay attention to chance mentions of people in conversation
- Cast your net widely — you may find help in other areas (eg, if you are interested in stroke prevention in primary care, find out what your peers in hospital are doing)

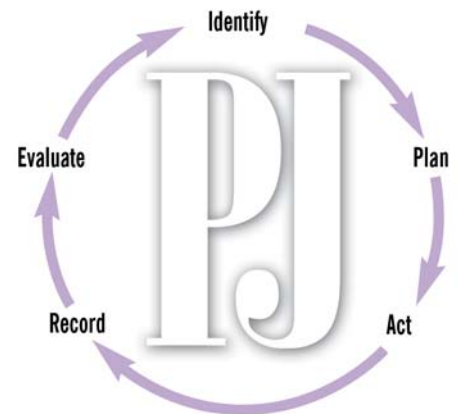
Work out shared interests Look at work that others have done. Work out what you have in common and include these when you practice explaining what you care about. This is important because relationships are founded on shared aims, values and opinions.

Inevitably, you will meet someone with completely different world views to your own. Although you need to put such differences in the background, this does not mean that you should avoid conflict to preserve a relationship. If you simply do this, you will become unable to assert your opinions. The secret to getting along with people is to concentrate on articulating similarities. For example, if you are using social theories to look at why there is a high rate of teenage pregnancies in your community and your relevant person is using social theories to look at smoking, focus on social theories.

Be aware that shared values make stronger professional bonds than shared ideas or interests and verbalise what you share (eg, “We both believe that the Royal Pharmaceutical Society should continue to regulate pharmacists”).

Make contact The ritual of meeting people is important, so it is a shame that people rarely talk about how to do it. The right way to start a relationship often depends on the person you want to approach. Some people, especially those who share your situation, will be more than happy to talk to you. However, professional networking is not the same as social networking — it can be more complex because people are anxious to maintain their professional personae.

You might find that the best way of making initial contact is to write or e-mail. For



Identify knowledge gaps

1. What is professional networking?
2. What are the steps to networking?
3. What can you do to get your name known?

Before reading on, think about how this article may help you to do your job better. The Royal Pharmaceutical Society's areas of competence for pharmacists are listed in “Plan and record”, (available at: www.rpsgb.org/education). This article relates to “interpersonal skills” (see appendix 4 of “Plan and record”).

example, if you have had a paper or article published, you might choose to send a copy to people on your list, briefly saying what you have in common and that you would be interested in hearing from them if they should happen to have any comments. Do not be disheartened if you do not get an immediate response. And if you receive no reply, just accept that people are busy.

Another way of making contact is to ask a mutual acquaintance to introduce you at a meeting. Even if he or she is not attending the meeting, perhaps your target person could be contacted in advance.

If your target person is giving a presentation, go to it. Ask an interesting question and aim to introduce yourself afterwards (most people are more relaxed after a presentation). The presentation will provide a topic for conversation. You could also ask about the people your target person works with and find out if you know anyone in common. But keep it low key. Your approach should be quiet but confident.

Positive communication Professional networking is about communicating positively, without “spin”. This means saying honest, positive things and avoiding criticism and negativity. Keep the conversation focused on professional topics that might allow you to share values. If the interaction goes well, you can end the conversation by offering to

Darrin Baines, BA, PhD, is a part-time senior research fellow in pharmacy practice, King's College London, and **Catherine Hale, BA, LLB**, is a lecturer in medical ethics and law, University of Birmingham

Panel 1: Networking tips

- Make an effort to attend conferences, professional meetings and even community events
- Submit papers to conferences
- Write an article or letter for publication in *The Journal* — it will, at least, provide people with a topic of conversation
- Use the internet to take part in group discussions
- A low-effort way to help the community and get your name known is to type up minutes or a straightforward account of a meeting on your a laptop computer and send it to a mailing list of people in your field
- Build relationships by sharing information, debating standards and guidelines and collaborating on projects
- Become a leader and organise events (eg, a CPD workshop)
- If you are good at planning become involved in a project that publicly demonstrates this
- Always act as a “host” (introduce people to each other, include them in things)
- Make sure your networking is planned and make it a target to contact all the people you want to approach over several months or a year
- Do not decline the invitation to eat with a group

exchange contact details. If, on the other hand, the conversation does not seem to be going anywhere, do not force it. Say something pleasant like “nice talking to you” and let it go.

Some interactions can make you feel negative. Acknowledge these feelings and, if you need to, talk to someone about it. Then carry on networking.

Network hierarchy Sometimes your relevant people might be much more senior than you and you might, understandably, feel uncomfortable about approaching them. These people already have a full network and define relevance differently. We suggest concentrating on meeting less intimidating people to build up your confidence. However, there may come a time when you really ought to network with a “big name”. In this case, your goal could be simply to bring yourself to his or her attention.

Follow up Time invested in building a relationship is wasted if that relationship is not maintained. Once you have made contact, keep in touch. Quarterly would be reasonable. Come up with simple ways to be useful to the people in your network. Pass things on to them and mention their work to others. For example, you could suggest someone to speak at your local branch meeting. However, professional networking is a matter of courtesy and not politicking. Do not overdo things — there should be no pressure or obligation. Approach the situation as ordinary co-operation among peers.

Other considerations

In addition to being aware of the networking process, several other factors can affect your networking success.

Personal presentation However fair we try to be, humans are programmed to judge others on appearance. For instance, we can find someone physically attractive, charismatic or charming. Personal presentation is linked with success and industries have developed where consultants make their living by offering advice on how to look.

To be accepted into a network, you need to dress in a way that shows you belong. Most industry people are conservative with their appearance — smart suits and shiny shoes are the norm. For community pharmacists, the look tends to be less slick and more trustworthy, so the clothes change slightly. Behind the dispensing bench, shoes need to be comfortable and sensible. Pharmacists in hospital or academia are usually more casual about their appearance. One aspect important to all sectors is good personal hygiene — groomed hair and clean nails are essential.

Mirror language and behaviour Looking the part is not enough. To be accepted, you must understand the behaviour of those you wish to influence and be able to speak their language. For example, the NHS has its own jargon and ways of doing things. Being able to talk about clinical governance and rationing will help you network with primary care organisation managers. Clinicians, on the other hand, may find you more acceptable if you emphasise your specialist skills in promoting appropriate prescribing. What you say can make you friends or enemies so choose what you say carefully.

Be realistic It is true that in life, unfortunately, what we know is not always as important as whom we know. For instance, being acquainted with someone on a job interview panel often helps weaker candidates. However, networking should not be thought of in terms of “if I get to know this person then maybe I will get this job”. That does not work. Enjoy getting to know people because you respect them. If you can establish interests and shared values good things will stem from that.

Ethics Pharmacists must be ethical in their behaviour so any attempts to win new business contacts should not be underhand. It would, however, be acceptable for a pharmacist to work voluntarily on a PCO committee in order to make new contacts who, eventually, might be useful.

Reputation building

Acceptance does not guarantee a long-term relationship. For example, the pharmaceutical industry is excellent at organising one-off meetings with NHS staff, but there is little evidence to suggest that it maintains long-term relationships successfully. What really

Action: practice points

Reading is only one way to undertake CPD and the Society will expect to see various approaches in a pharmacist's CPD portfolio.

1. For the next five people you meet (not friends or family), think of three positive things to say to them or about them.
2. Devote an evening or day each month to sustaining your professional life through networking.
3. Conduct a self-audit that identifies your strengths and weaknesses in terms of appearance, social contacts and reputation. Think about the qualities that make people popular.

Evaluate

For your work to be presented as CPD, you need to evaluate your reading and any other activities. Answer the following questions: What have you learnt? How has it added value to your practice? (Have you applied this learning or had any feedback?) What will you do now and how will this be achieved?

affects the development of long-term relationships is reputation. This can be defined as the perceptions others have of you as a social entity. In other words, what you are like as a person or a business.

If you have a bad reputation, you risk being blocked out of a network. Therefore, you must invest time and effort into making sure that good opinions about you exist and are maintained. Spend time working on your faults and building on your strengths. For example, if you are a bad timekeeper work on this so you, eventually, develop a reputation for being reliable.

Few people spend time exploring how to be likeable human beings, so our social success depends on chance. Worse still, some individuals take the protective view that, if other people do not like them as they are, that is their problem. But being unpopular in a profession or business simply does not work. For example, the laws of commerce state that companies with no customers do not survive. Invest in yourself by correcting your faults.

Conclusion

Networking is not a dirty word. Establishing yourself in particular professional communities will change you. It will allow you to encounter a variety of interesting opinions. And, because you regularly engage in ongoing discussions, you will become more comfortable in your speaking and writing.

Although the network process looks simple on paper, it can be difficult to implement. It takes time and energy. Often it will be a question of trying different approaches until you find one you are comfortable with. But if you look at network-building as a long-term investment, you will be sure to profit.

Panel 1 gives further networking tips.