

Why Networking Clubs Aren't Just for the Boys

By Susan Wilson Solovic

The good old boys' network controls business and politics as it has for centuries. There's no special criterion for membership in the boys' club other than gender. Becoming a member is a rite of passage for young boys as they emerge from adolescence and mature into manhood.

However, membership in the boys' club has definite advantages. As a member, you're privy to important information, and many critical business decisions are based on the club's membership roster. Club meetings are often held in such places as golf courses, men's rooms and smoke-filled cigar bars. The club conveys fraternity-like relationships among members. With its unwritten rule, "No women allowed," the informal good old boys' network continues to bar women from top management.

Historically, women have had no comparable alternative to the good old boys' club. During the first half of the 21st century, no female organizations related to business existed, and most of the professional and civic organizations, such as the Rotary Club, didn't allow women members. The brave women in the workplace, particularly those who had aspirations for advancement, found themselves isolated and alone.

"After World War II, my dad came home from the war and said these women don't have any network. He realized the network was men's way of connecting outside of the workplace, and he wanted to create that for women, so he founded the [American Business Women's Association](#)," says Carolyn Elman, executive director of the Kansas City, Mo.-based nonprofit.

Today there are thousands of women's organizations ranging from the broad-based, such as the [National Association of Female Executives](#), to the more specific, such as [Women in Agriculture](#). These organizations provide members with support and an opportunity to learn and share information. Additionally, women's organizations offer the opportunity to practice developing leadership skills. By accepting leadership positions within these groups, women can demonstrate their ability to excel and gain visibility for themselves.

Becoming a Networking Queen

Joining one of the many women's organizations is an important first step in building your network. But a real networking queen knows there's more to building a network than joining a club.

"Women don't know how to be good old boys. Men know how to move around and make sure they get the business to their buddy," says Marsha Serlin, chief executive officer of United Scrap Metal, a scrap-metal recycling business in Cicero, Ill.

You probably already have the foundation of a personal network. Think about the number of acquaintances you have from work, industry associations and charitable organizations. However, if you're like most women, you probably don't use 90% of these contacts. These associates and friends can be the beginning of your personal network.

However, a truly strong personal network is not built from a list of mere acquaintances. Juanita Weaver, a consultant based in the Washington, D.C., area, is a true networking queen. She has an address book that looks like the New York City white pages. While she seems to know everyone, what's most impressive is

that most people refer to her as a good friend. What's her secret? She says it's creating a human connection.

"That doesn't mean I don't talk to a lot of people, but I really try to come home with one special connection," she explains. "I am always interested in the other person as a person and not just as a contact, and I think people feel that difference."

Effective networking is time-consuming, and you may think that you're too busy managing your home, family or business to find time. But if your goal is to have success and power, you can't afford not to network. You never know when you'll meet someone who will be instrumental in helping you to achieve your goals.

The number of networking, professional association, civic and charitable group events held in any given week can be overwhelming. Don't drive yourself crazy trying to hit them all -- be smart. Carefully select the events that you believe are the best fit for you personally and professionally.

"Figure out what kind of contacts are most useful to your particular business, and think broadly. You don't just want to know people in your industry. You want to know people in a lot of different areas. In today's marketplace, connections with all kinds of groups and organizations and industries are becoming more and more important," Ms. Weaver suggests.

Help Yourself by Helping Others

When building a network, remember to give before you get. Take time to help others before seeking favors for yourself. If you focus on handing out cards to a million people in anticipation of getting immediate results, you'll be disappointed. But by first trying to assist someone else, rewards eventually will come your way.

Additionally, as you build your network, stay in contact with the people you meet. Communication is the glue that holds a network together. Take time to write personal notes. Sincere ones can have a tremendous and long-lasting impact. In fact, writing personal notes to others is one of the ways former President George W. Bush built his vast personal network.

The advantages of a far-reaching network are numerous. For example, you'll know the right person to call when you need help. Whether you're looking for a doctor, hairdresser, new supplier, new employee, banker or great restaurant, you'll at least have a place to start and a connection with someone who can point you in the right direction.

"I've heard it called the power of weak connections. If you look at somebody who has gotten a job -- how many know the person who hired them? Not many. It's usually because somebody recommended them. It's not that the person recommending was necessarily best friends with the person doing the hiring, maybe they only see each other twice a year, but there's a connection," Ms. Weaver explains.

In an ideal world, opportunities would come our way because of our talent and abilities. But we don't live in an ideal world, and it's not what you know, but whom you know. Build a strong network -- and become a networking queen.

-- Ms. Wilson Solovic is author of "The Girl's Guide to Power and Success" (Amacom, 2001), from which this article has been adapted.