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When Pals Pay

By **Jack Downton**

It used to be that using relationships to get new work was frowned upon. We've all been subjected to the: "Do you mind if I ask what kind of pension provision you have?" question from a friend of a friend (probably now ex-friend) who kindly passed on your contact details. The approach is not warmly received and the memory lives on when we are asked to open our own little black book of friends and contacts for the purpose of winning work.

Of course, these days we're all digital. Adding all your ex-colleagues, old college pals, and business associates to your LinkedIn network and watching the numbers grow as it unearths people you'd forgotten all about or didn't know how to get in touch with, is one thing. Using those relationships to win more work is quite another.

How do you develop your ability to initiate and develop strong relationships so that you are able to remain in constant contact and introduce them to new services as and when appropriate?

Trust is key, both personal trust as well as professional trust. The first step is to be natural and not try to imitate other people. If you are not yourself, people will see you as not being authentic and trust will be lost.

The nature of a network of relationships is that they run two ways. Before you start to think about what products you can sell to the people in your network, think about what you can do for them rather than what they can do for you. Can you help them in any way by connecting them with someone who could be useful to them or sharing information they didn't know?

To do this, you will need to understand their needs. For any relationship to develop there must be mutual understanding between the parties. Asking questions and really listening to what the other party has to say is important. Let the answers inform your further questions and show your interest, whether the conversation takes place on the phone, by email or in person.

Crucially, don't sell. Let people know what you are doing and show enthusiasm for what you do (we are often judged more on our commitment than what we actually do). If you have identified a genuine need where you think your firm's services could make a difference, keep your pitch short. Express it naturally and focus on the benefits it will bring. Make sure you follow-up within 48 hours.

Whatever the outcome – stay in touch. Send them an article, tell them what you are doing, or just ask them how they are. We are moving towards the Christmas drinks season and there will be myriad opportunities to catch-up with friends and colleagues. Try not to leave it a year before you catch-up with them again.

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