



Roundtable Member

Elliott Silverstein,

Manager of Government Relations at CAA South Central Ontario (CAA SCO), shared his perspective with our team on how to maintain your network.

Mentoring MATTERS



I know how important networking is, but it always falls to the bottom of the pile with all the other work that needs to get done. Then I feel guilty reaching out to people to keep in touch when the time has lapsed. What strategies can I use to stay relevant to my network and stay on their radar?

I recall a former colleague comparing networking to flossing your teeth. We all know we should do it; we're reminded constantly why we should do it; we know the risks involved if we don't do it; but we don't always take the time to make it happen.

We lead increasingly busy lives, both at the office and during our personal time. And, as we continue to be increasingly accessible, various issues and projects take us off course from accomplishing what we set out to do. We all have things in our "to do" list that should be a priority but that may not always make the cut. From a professional perspective, networking is something that benefits everyone but often takes a back seat to burning issues, breaking news, and urgent deadlines.

Over the past 15 years, I've been blessed to observe and work with some of the greatest networkers out there. Through many years working in public relations, government relations and at CAA, I've seen first hand the power, importance and value of networking as both a short term and long term tool.

My network seems like it is rapidly growing, both internally at CAA and among government and key stakeholders, presenting the need for consistent reengagement with an expanded group. Often the expansion begins with attending industry events where I "work the room" by catching up with contacts. I walk out with dozens of new business cards in an evening, and from there I will follow up with emails or a LinkedIn request and keep the lines of communication open.

To be truly successful, networking requires strategy, time investment and ongoing maintenance.

There isn't a single solution to the question of how to better network. Instead it's a matter of practice and finding the model or tactics that work best for you. Networking may not always yield a result, but it offers an opportunity for follow up.

Here are some considerations and some "dos and don'ts", as you think about what works best for you:

Networking Doesn't Need To Be Formal

Some of the best opportunities for networking are when you least expect it. It's important to demystify that networking needs to be simply a formal exercise of emails, LinkedIn and receptions. In our busy lives, the opportunity for networking spans beyond the 9-5 business day. In fact, those informal moments can provide excellent opportunities to reengage and further your existing connections. Chance meetings, brief and unintended contacts like seeing someone on the street, being seated at adjacent tables at a restaurant, bumping into someone at Costco or at a sporting event are all informal networking opportunities that I've personally experienced.

As I was writing this, I was contacted by a Toronto newspaper reporter looking for comment on a story. Her introductory email recalled meeting me as a teenager over 25 years ago, when she was interviewing my dad for a column. Both an icebreaker and a reengagement, it allowed for an extended conversation beyond the original subject.

Key Strategies That Will Go A Long Way

It's the little things that go a long way. We're fortunate to have tools like LinkedIn to view professional updates and other social media platforms to monitor an individual's posts. Networking is like a form of continuing education - understand the issues that matter to your contacts, become familiar with interests or key projects. Doing so helps build your personal brand in the process, and creates a stronger relationship.

- Prioritize your contacts – Identify 5, 15 or 20 contacts where you want to maintain or strengthen the professional relationship. We may know hundreds of people and have lofty goals, but start small and focus on those you identify as most important to building your personal brand and achieving your professional goals.
- Keep your business cards handy – From my car to my wallet and in every suit jacket and seasonal coat, I have my business card ready and waiting. You never know when you'll need them.

- Send holiday cards – What was once common for many businesses has been scaled back in recent years. Identify your top tier of contacts and send them a personal note this holiday season. Following up again in the New Year could lead to a stronger personal network and furthering your own brand.
- Listen actively – We have access to an ever-growing amount of information online and in the media. If you see something about a contact or their organization, write a note or make a phone call to acknowledge this. The sincerity of personally extending congratulations will go a long way, and far beyond the conventional “Like” button on LinkedIn or Facebook.
- Take time and make notes – Networking needs to be built into your regular schedule. Routine is key. Successful networking can be as simple as making notes on the back of a business card to remember key details for when you connect next. Most business cards I have in my binders include the date and location that I received it, or common contacts we may share.
- Always follow up – Don’t ever expect someone to get back to you. If you want it, seize it.

What To Avoid?

Maintaining your network isn't an overnight project. Networking is increasingly becoming a necessity, not just for your current role, but also for yourself. In addition to considering what to do, here are some things not to do:

- Calling in a favour out of nowhere – Rather than simply connecting when you need something fast, reach out when you don't need to.
- Focusing on the title – Communicate with the person, and not the position or title they hold. Remember, titles change over the course of one's career and you want your connection to last.
- Avoiding or Procrastinating – Networking is not easy for everyone. It's important to try and step out of your comfort zone. Not engaging or maintaining your network can lead to being disconnected and the impact may only be visible down the road.

Networking is a powerful tool at any stage of your career. The hardest part is getting into and maintaining a routine. While many see it as a daunting challenge, let's step back and realize that each day we are building, managing and enhancing our networks, sometimes without even knowing it. Effective networking offers you a competitive edge that comes with gathering knowledge, learning and communicating with people.



Elliott Silverstein is Manager of Government Relations at CAA South Central Ontario (CAA SCO). He has been with CAA since 2011 and is currently responsible for managing and executing key elements of CAA's provincial advocacy role, and overseeing municipal advocacy efforts. Elliott is actively representing CAA SCO's members with municipal and provincial governments, on issues concerning personal mobility, road safety, consumer protection, and motorist-related legislation.

Prior to joining CAA, Elliott spent several years at Hill & Knowlton Canada, one of Canada's largest public affairs and public relations consulting firms. He holds a Master's of Arts in Communications from both York University and Ryerson University.



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Glain Roberts-McCabe is passionate about the art of leadership and supporting ambitious mid-career leaders. She created **The Roundtable** to provide emerging leaders with the navigational skills, tools and savvy needed to manage increases in scope, pressure and leadership complexity.