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The “Connection” Key: Seven Ways the World’s Most Successful Businesspeople Trounce the Competition—and How You Can, Too.

By Maribeth Kuzmeski

Seeking the secret to business success? Of course you are! And if you think it comes down to smarts, guts, rare talent, or plain old luck, you’re barking up the wrong tree. The missing ingredient is one that might surprise you: the ability to meaningfully connect with others.

It’s a question most of us have asked ourselves: What makes successful people so, well, *successful*? It’s tempting to think that those at the top of the ladder know something the rest of us mere mortals don’t—and at a time when we’re all desperate to hold onto jobs, clients, and market shares, the quest for that missing ingredient takes on new gravity. But that “special something” you’ve been searching for isn’t an uncanny ability to predict the market’s future, a membership with MENSA, or a secret business formula.

Quite simply, what sets you apart from the competition is your ability to connect.

Relationships are the real secret to success. If you can build strong relationships and connect with your customers and colleagues, you will get your piece of the proverbial pie. If you can’t, you’ll be scrambling for crumbs.

Whether you’re a salesperson, an entrepreneur, or an executive, your ultimate job is to bring in clients and keep them. Those are the basics. Problem is, the competition is increasingly brutal. No matter what you sell, someone somewhere is selling it cheaper and faster than you can. So how do you differentiate yourself? The answer is less about what you do (think business school best practices) than *how* you do it—and with *whom*. After all, the world is full of very intelligent people who have never achieved great levels of success.

Fundamentally, humans are social animals. Our brains are wired to connect with the brains of others, and every interaction influences the future behavior of both parties. How good

you are or aren't at building quality relationships has a measurable impact on your ultimate success. If you are able to truly connect with feeling, purpose, and honesty, you will experience faster closes, smoother client and customer interactions, and lots of long-term business. On top of that, you'll become known as a great leader.

That sounds great, you might be thinking. But I'm not exactly dripping with charisma. I'm not sure I have the social skills I'd need to do all of that!

Not to worry. With the right tools, strategies, and tactics, you can change the way you develop relationships and forge a network of colleagues and contacts who will stick with you through thick and thin—and best of all, voluntarily recommend your services to others.

If you're ready to stop going through the motions and start truly connecting, read on for some straightforward, easy-to-apply tips that will garner immediate results.

Make the right connections—even if you're not a “people person.” *Anyone* can become an effective connector. If you love to meet new people and enjoy being the center of attention, that's great. If not—that's okay, too. Connecting is actually less about being gregarious and more about your awareness of the relationships you are forming. To maximize the value of your interactions, you should start by first figuring out to whom you're relating, and how you're doing it.

Don't panic—there's no need to become best friends with every single person you meet! Instead, think about the people with whom it's important for you to become well acquainted in order to create loyal clients, further your career, and build a successful business. Consider categories like clients and vendors, or specific individuals within categories. Then jot down some ideas for reaching out to each of these people.

Improve your social IQ. No matter how much you know, there's always more to learn—and that's just as true for social intelligence as it is for book smarts. Once you've determined where your connections need to be made, think about how you currently interact with these people, and be honest with yourself. Are you exclusive, controlling, and distant? Or are you inclusive, empathetic, and warm? How often do you reach out? Do you take into account what others think? How do you make them feel?

At the end of each day you spend a few minutes completing the following process:

- Review the day and your interactions with staff and clients.
- Rate today's positive impact on others (Grades A-F).

- Write down the notable successes and failures from the day.

Always, always, always be mindful of the fact that your words and actions have a powerful effect on others. The people with whom you interact will unconsciously and instinctively mirror your emotions. That's why it's so important to improve your social IQ. Once you've pinpointed the areas in which you need to improve, rehearse mentally. Anticipate how people might react to what you say. Rehearse conversations in advance. Develop a vision for yourself and how you'd like to change. Then, commit to doing it.

Remember, it's not about you. It's a dog-eat-dog world, and the urge to look out for Number One can sometimes be overwhelming. But while primarily protecting your own interests might ensure your survival, you probably won't experience across-the-board success until you put others first. Instead of asking, "What's in it for me?" you need to learn to ask, "What's in it for them?" Face it: No one rises to the top without the help of a team...and wouldn't it be nice if yours was truly invested in your success?

When people know that they matter to you, their attitudes toward you change. Their respect for you grows, they'll work harder, and they'll be aligned with your goals. When your team wins, so do you. But make no mistake: Putting others first is hard work. It means pleasantly greeting each of your employees, even if you're having a bad day. It means advising your client to make a prudent financial choice, even if you won't net as much profit. It means humbling yourself and, at times, sacrificing your own desires and needs. In the end, though, you'll reap the rewards.

It's amazing how far a welcoming demeanor, empathy, and authenticity can take you. People all around you want desperately to know that they matter. If you're ready and willing to stand with them and help meet their needs, they'll return the favor. That's the true path to greatness: It lives not *in* you, but *through* you.

Don't just network. Work your network. These days, technology makes networking almost too easy. Social media tools like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter enable anyone to build and maintain an impressively large web of business relationships. However, like a full but dusty Rolodex, a large online "network" doesn't do you much good simply by existing. In order to truly leverage the business connections you make, you've got to put in some effort.

I recommend using three main types of contact strategies for keeping in touch:

- Meeting follow-up: Have a system for following up after a meeting, call, or contact with an individual or a business. This could be a handwritten note, an email, a phone call, or even a social media contact.
- Periodic individual contact: Reach out to existing contacts on a systematic, periodic basis to stay in touch and maintain the relationship.
- Communication campaigns: Target a subgroup within your network (e.g., clients, prospects, etc.) whenever you have something you particularly want them to know.

Many people have the best of intentions when making a new business acquaintance, but they just haven't acquired the proper strategies for truly keeping in touch. Yes, the prospect of staying connected to all 1,000-some folks in your LinkedIn network seems daunting. But if you break it down to reaching out to 20 or so people a week, the task is much more manageable. Be diligent! The hardest part about keeping in contact is doing so consistently. Remember, the rewards are worth it. Your contacts will remember your name and will appreciate your efforts!

Don't just hear—listen. *Hearing* is a physical ability. *Listening* is a skill that must be learned and practiced. In today's hectic, instant-everything world, most people just aren't willing to take the time. Admit it: As you're listening to a team member deliver a report, you're already thinking about how those results might be applied. Now, while there's nothing wrong with mentally multitasking and being eager to get to the next step, there's also a great deal to be gained from hitting the pause button and focusing on others.

So, what does it mean to “really” listen? Here are some suggestions:

- In addition to hearing what someone else has said, actively try to understand their words in your own way, and ensure that you understand what he or she means. Ask questions to confirm that any assumptions you've made are true.
- Make sure the speaker has your full attention. Watch for non-verbal cues, stay focused, and don't interrupt.
- Show that you're listening. Let your face display a range of emotions that reflect that you're paying attention, and acknowledge what the speaker is saying every so often with an “Uh-huh” or a “Sure.”
- Most importantly, remember that you're there for the speaker, not the other way around. Your job isn't to jump to conclusions or one-up the other person with a story of your own!

Because so few people truly practice the art of listening, it's the most effective way to make lasting connections with others. Being a good listener sets you apart! It makes you very likeable because others will feel comfortable and valuable when they're with you. Cultivating this skill will bring you satisfied customers, content employees, and trusting supervisors. Guaranteed.

Make it personal. When you meet with a client, you're there to talk about your product or service, right? Wrong. You're there to talk about the client and what's important to him. Think about it: When you focus all your energy on selling something, the meeting is about *you*. But when you make it about the other person, ask questions, and show that you care, you differentiate yourself by connecting with the buyer emotionally—and more often than not, the sale will close itself.

Instead of extolling the virtues and advantages of your product (which implies that the prospective buyer has made the *wrong* choice in the past), find out what's important to her. Ask questions and actively listen to what she wants. Try to understand where she's coming from as completely as you can. I call this technique asking “heart questions.” For example, instead of

simply presenting a numbers-based plan, a financial advisor might first ask questions about his prospect's family: How many children does she have? What is her personality like? How does she handle money?

By connecting emotionally with a prospect, you open up a line of trust that causes the prospect to *want* to buy from you. And the more you know about your prospect, the better you'll be able to provide him with a product or service that is exactly tailored to his needs. Chances are, he'll come to his own conclusion that he simply *must* have what you're offering—without you ever having to “sell” a thing.

Be referable. (And if you're not, find out why.) When your clients are reasonably satisfied with your services, they ought to agree to endorse you to others. So why don't they do it? Wouldn't it be amazing if your clients were so impressed with your company that they voluntarily shared you with others? It's not outside the realm of possibility.

If you're not currently receiving the amount of referrals you'd like, don't assume that you're not referable. Chances are, there is simply a disconnect between you and your clients that is affecting the number of referrals you receive. After all, the insider perception of the business is not the same as how clients actually see things. In order to develop the kind of customer loyalty that lasts forever and acts as your most valuable marketing tool, your company must be the type that is visible and credible in the eyes of customers—and it must always exceed their expectations.

Develop a “Client Delight Survey” that covers every detail of the client's experience. Ask about the client's perception of quality of communication, time spent on the project, response to problems or setbacks, willingness to go the extra mile, and what stood out. It sounds simple, but if you take this feedback to heart, you'll gain awareness of directions you can take for increasing referrals. Moreover, your clients will feel that you've truly taken time to form a relationship with them, and they'll want to tell everyone else about how unique you are!

Connecting takes time, it takes effort, and it means putting others before yourself. But it's worth every second of time and every ounce of energy. Your relationships will be more prolific and rewarding, and you will be more successful. Don't let yourself settle for a position on the fringes when you could dwell at the epicenter of productivity and success...even now!

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Twenty-one Simple Tips and Tricks to Help You Connect (Some of Which May Surprise You!)

Excerpted from *The Connectors: How the World's Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life*

1. **Share something personal.** When you share something that isn't about numbers and the bottom line with another individual (e.g., a story about parenting or your struggle to balance your job and your personal life), he'll be able to personally identify with you, and he'll become more invested in your goals and achievements.
2. **Don't pretend to be perfect.** Everyone loves it when an underdog wins. It's natural to want to root for someone who faces the same challenges you do—so don't feel that your customers and colleagues have to believe that you're perfect!
3. **Always say thank you.** Nobody makes it to the top on her own, so be sure to sincerely thank the people who have helped you succeed—no matter how large or small their contributions!
4. **Pretend that every single person you meet has a sign around his or her neck that reads, "Make me feel important."** This was the life philosophy of Mary Kay Ash, the well-known cosmetics mogul. Her genuine concern for others catapulted her out of poverty and was the secret to her success.
5. **Seek out a common interest.** People want others to be like them. Establishing that you and a client root for the same baseball team or volunteer at the same charity will go a long way in making you relevant in his eyes!
6. **Don't work from a script.** Try to scrap the memorized pitch in favor of a more natural conversation. You'll seem more at ease and authentic—and your prospect will be less tempted to think that you're fluffing up the facts.
7. **Remember the remarkable.** Entrepreneur Susan Bates makes a point to identify and write down the things that stand out to her in every conversation. She then references those statements in future interactions—and has been amazed by the reactions she's gotten when others realize that she has paid attention to and valued what they've said!
8. **Cultivate curiosity.** According to Lee Iacocca, former Chrysler CEO, "A leader has to show curiosity. He has to listen to people outside of the 'Yes, sir' crowd in his inner circle. Businesspeople need to listen at least as much as they need to talk. Too many people fail to realize that real communication goes in both directions."

9. **Act like a good listener. (Don't let your body image betray you!)** We're constantly bombarded with information, so it's almost instinctive to tune it out. When you're interacting with someone, you need to consciously change your body language to reflect that you *want* to receive information; otherwise, it may appear that you're trying to get away from it. Remember, your face says it all.
10. **Resist the urge to be a one-upper.** Perhaps you feel compelled to share that you battled the flu for twice as long as your colleague. Or maybe you're dying to tell your client how great your vacation to Hawaii was after she mentions her trip to the lake. Three words: Don't. Do. It. When you're always trying to top other people, you're ruining communication.
11. **Ask effective questions.** When you're communicating, remember: garbage in, garbage out. If you ask the wrong questions, you'll get the wrong answers—or at least different answers from the ones you were hoping for. Think about what you're hoping to learn, and remember that an open-ended question is almost always more effective than one that elicits a simple “Yes” or “No” answer.
12. **Play dumb.** Socrates used this technique more than 2,300 years ago by feigning ignorance in order to encourage others to express their views fully. Today, many of the world's most successful businesspeople do the same.
13. **Know your audience.** Whether you're dealing with a colleague, boss, client, or recent acquaintance, it pays to do a little research. Once you know what a person wants, is interested in, and responds to, you'll be better equipped to deliver just that.
14. **Remember, “When she cries, she buys.”** This is the motto of Wisconsin-based financial advisor Dale Froehlich, who closes over 90 percent of his sales. What he means by this is simple: Ask questions about something that's close to the heart of the prospect (e.g., her children). Once she opens up to you, she trusts you. Then, she won't want to go anywhere else.
15. **Give 'em something to talk about.** Don't assume that people talk about the things that are at the core of what your company provides. After all, those things are *supposed* to be there. However, people will remember and talk about the unexpected things that set you apart. It's often the small things that get people talking. Wouldn't it be nice if a store clerk gave you an extra 10 percent off your purchase for no particular reason, or if the restaurant manager threw in a free dessert?
16. **Let your passion shine through.** If you're truly energetic and passionate about what you do, other people will notice. They may buy from you, they may talk about you, or they may follow your career—and they'll definitely feel connected to you!

17. **Brand yourself.** You don't have to plaster your picture all over a billboard or give clients a smiling bobblehead version of yourself, but you should leave something behind with the people you encounter: a thought, a memory, or a connection. For example, one businessman who is very health-conscious focuses on his clients' overall well-being by incorporating healthy food, videos, books, and posters into his unrelated business offerings.
18. **Always take the high road.** All of us are faced with decisions that have ethical ramifications. You might have to think about containing costs, managing expectations, dealing with an error, or handling disagreements. Remember that it's a small world, and that you never know whose path you might cross or re-cross—so make sure you have nothing to be ashamed of.
19. **Lend a helping hand.** Don't be so focused on money that it's your only motivator. When you can afford to, help out your colleagues and clients even if you don't stand to gain anything material. What you will gain is even more valuable: respect and loyalty.
20. **Stay in touch.** It's important to stay in contact with everyone in your network. Implement a system that helps you consistently reach out to all of your business acquaintances. Even if you're just saying hello, you'll stay on their radars!
21. **Take a cue from plastic wrap: Be transparent!** Always make sure that your employees and colleagues are aware of what's going on in your company. If you are up-front about your decision-making processes, goals, and company news, you'll earn everyone's trust, and they'll be more willing to unreservedly work for you and with you. Remember, honesty is the sign of a healthy company.

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