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Female Style of Networking - Detrimental to Success?

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Editors Notes: Are women better networkers or just different than men? Do men go for the size/volume of business relationships while women build smaller more meaningful relationships? Does this help or hurt women?

Women are born networkers. After all, at its core, networking is about connecting with other people, and that's something women excel at. Connecting is in our DNA.

Given that we have the social gene, I've been surprised in my work as a coach and the research I did for my new book, *The Female Brand*, that women often don't have an expansive network – yet men do. We women tend to favor deep relationships with a group of close friends, a preference evolutionary scientists trace back to our roots as family caretakers and home keepers. We also see the preference for close, intense relationships in playground studies. Most girls tend to pair up and play one-on-one or with a small group, while boys are more likely to play with a series of different mates and play with a larger group. Later, when female hormones kick in, the preference for intimate relationships with a small group of friends accelerates.

A small group of deep relationships provides women with a reliable source of support and advice, but in the wider world of careers and brand building, a small though intensely committed group is not as advantageous as a large network of contacts – even if those contacts are superficial. In my coaching of senior executives, I also found that women, unlike men, are less likely to ask for a favor or introduction unless they know someone well. For many women, calling up a virtual stranger is painful. Likewise, women seemed more reluctant to do a favor for someone they didn't know – say, recommend a friend of a friend for a job – unless they had actual experience working with the person.

Men, on the whole, seem less constrained in networking. Guys understand the mutual advantage of helping one another out. Many men can know someone casually or hardly at all and think it's no big deal to call him to arrange an informational interview or pitch him for a specific job opportunity. They feel more comfortable pitching a casual friend or a friend of a friend.

That same tendency may be apparent in a recent Harvard Business Publishing study on Twitter usage, based on a random sample of 300,000 Twitter users in May 2009. Though men and women follow a similar number of users, men have 15 percent more followers than women and they have more reciprocated relationships in which two users follow each other, according to the report. The study also pointed out that women seem to be less compelled to have followers or "have more stringent thresholds for reciprocating relationships."

The male networking model is something women need to think about, because in the world of work, the larger your network, the more career capital you will have. Networks are powerful

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because of their size and range, and the comfort they provide for making and accepting professional contacts.

Here are some thoughts on how to get into the right mindset for networking:

- Run in packs – just like men do. Since women are masters of deep relationships, there’s no reason we can’t expand our relationship model to connect with more people on a less personal and less intense level. Of course, many successful women have, and it’s a smart strategy because the reality is that you can’t do as much on your own with a small network of supporters
- Think of networking as an economy – an economy of favors. Networking involves an economy – an economy of favors. It’s a hidden economy, but a powerful one. The networking trade works like this: I do you a favor, and there is the unspoken understanding that you will return the favor if there is an opportunity. A networking economy only works if there is active trade back and forth. Favor givers are attracted to those who reciprocate, and punish those who take a favor and don’t reciprocate. Believe me, word will get out on what type you are. It’s an economy men know well. Women have all the right skills to be excellent players too.
- Realize that a big network gives you career capital. A large, robust network is career capital that you can practically take to the bank. The bigger your network, the more success you are likely to have, because you will have access to more options. Realize too that an all-female network equals a weak network. After all, there are more men in positions of power, so you’ll want men and women on your networking team. Don’t think they don’t count if they are soft links – people whom you don’t know well. Every job I have gotten was through people I didn’t know well.
- Ask, and you shall receive. One thing we women have to overcome is a reluctance to ask for a favor. We need to drop the soul searching and self-doubt that so many of us go through in asking for something for ourselves. It’s often as simple as asking for a favor. Studies show that if you preface a request with “I’m wondering if you can help me,” and then make a small, specific request, you will be more successful. But most of the time you will need more finesse, especially if you want to seek help for bigger things. Most people will be happy to share their career experience and advice if you ask. For example, “Can I brainstorm with you for 15 minutes over the phone about how to move up from my current job? I’ve admired how you transitioned into various jobs and I’d love to hear about it.”

It’s a big world out there, and you can be a big part of it (with your network cast far and wide).

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