

Building and maintaining a professional network

How many professional colleagues, beyond those you currently work with, do you have contact information for? Whom would you contact if you wanted to change jobs or were laid off? Are you comfortable meeting new people and do you seek them out?

A professional network is a group of colleagues whom you know and are able to contact for a variety of issues. Networking is a mutual give and take that results in a winning situation for everyone involved. People who network give and connect without expecting anything in return, except assistance when they need it. Every pharmacist must have a professional network to be truly successful.

There are many benefits of a professional network. It can, for example, provide contacts who can

- Assist you in having a professionally challenging and satisfying career,
- Provide insight about how the pharmacy world functions (e.g., which professional organizations to join, how to become active in professional organizations, how to keep up professionally),
- Provide ideas about how to resolve therapeutic or service challenges, how other pharmacy services organize and process their work, or how new regulations are being met,

- Counsel you about your difficult work situations (e.g., working many weekends, changes in staffing),
- Help you with career options and assist you in finding another pharmacy position,



- Assist you in speaking publicly about the profession and getting your writing published in scholarly literature,
- Help you if you move to another state and connect you with someone there who can acclimate you to it, and
- Develop into true and lasting friends.

Creating a professional network.

Start building a professional network as early in your career as possible, even as a student. Always carry business cards

with you, even at work. If your employer does not provide them, either have some printed or use a program like Microsoft Publisher (Microsoft, Redmond, WA) (comes with Windows XP Professional) and buy sheets of blank cards from any office supply store and print your own. Another option is www.vistaprint.com. Be sure your cards list your name, degree, title, employer, phone number, e-mail address, and complete mailing address. Every time you meet new people, give them your business card and ask for their card. If they do not have one, ask them to e-mail you so you have their contact information and the correct spelling of their name. Keep these business cards either in a business-card box or in plastic sheets that fit in three-ring binders. Be sure your professional e-mail has an autosignature that gives your contact information (the same information as on your business cards).

Attend as many local, state, and national professional meetings as possible. Use the meetings as opportunities to meet new colleagues instead of sitting or talking with people you already know. Be proactive in introducing yourself to people, ask them where they work and what their responsibilities are, and exchange business cards with them. Write notes about them on the back of their business cards to refresh your memory later. Most professional meetings have social events, such as coffee breaks, meals, receptions, or parties, which are good networking opportunities. If you recognize professional movers and shakers, such as speakers, VIPs, officers, and veterans, and you do not know them, introduce yourself and exchange business cards. Do not be intimidated by what you perceive they have accomplished, because they were once in your place careerwise. Likewise, do not

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The Success Skills column provides practical advice to help pharmacists become more effective in their professional and personal lives. Installments are contributed by and reflect the views of Sara J. White, M.S., FASHP, Pharmacy Leadership Coach, Mountain View, CA.

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worry about imposing on them as it is a compliment if you seek their advice. Do not wait to be discovered; you must be the CEO of your career and take the responsibility of having a satisfying career. Managing your career is like exercise—you must do it for yourself because no one can do it for you. Watch whom other people are going up to and join that group.

Meeting new people involves beginning the conversation, maintaining it, and sincerely listening. If this is out of your comfort zone, then start small with a goal of only one or two people and then increase the number as you gain some experience. The following are some suggestions that will need to be tailored to the situation depending on the amount of time you will have with the person, such as a brief time at a reception versus a longer time at a dinner, or a one-time encounter versus additional encounters.

Beginning and maintaining the conversation. People who are successful make other people feel included, valued, special, and comfortable. People appreciate conversations in which they feel acknowledged, heard, and significant. Always ask open-ended questions (those that cannot be answered by yes or no). Keep in mind that colleagues hire, appoint, and vote for people whom they have met. Look for an approachable person—someone who is alone and smiles and makes eye contact with you—or speak to the person you are standing in line with. Smile, make eye contact, offer a handshake, and introduce yourself by giving him or her your name, title, and the organization you work for. People appreciate it when you initiate the conversation. If you do not receive similar information, ask where the person works and what responsibilities he or she has. Repeat his or her first name (this helps you to remember it) with “Nice to meet you.”

You need to maintain the conversation by asking additional questions. Let the other person do most of the talking. Seek common interests, goals, and experiences. Some examples might be as follows (think of the general areas of pharmacy practice, family, and personal interests):

- How did you get started in pharmacy and why did you choose pharmacy? What do you enjoy most about your practice? What is unique about your practice (what are you proud of)? What is a typical day like? What advice do you have for younger practitioners (if appropriate)? What significant changes in pharmacy have you seen and what do you think is coming?
- Tell me about your family. What is your favorite activity that is unrelated to work? How do you spend your leisure time? What would you do if you had all the money and time in the world?

Many answers provide the opportunity to ask another question that delves deeper into the subject, such as, “I like movies—what good ones have you seen recently?”

As you get to know people who are veterans of pharmacy practice, spend time with them because members of their pro-

fessional network will come up to visit and you will be introduced to them.

Do not shy away from groups of people. As you approach a group, look for the person who acknowledges you and introduce yourself. Participate in but do not take over the ongoing conversation.

Use chance encounters to meet someone new and exchange business cards. This may be an appropriate way to become known outside of the pharmacy.

If time runs out or you want to move on to meet another person, thank the people for their time and use their names again (and be sure you have exchanged business cards).

Listening. Sincerely listening is critical to building and maintaining a professional network. So few people take the time to listen that you will stand out as an extraordinarily caring person. Sincerely listening means be present; eliminate any tendency to daydream. Do not drift off and lose your focus on your conversational partner. Build rapport by being sensitive to the other person. Approximate his or her gestures, facial expressions, and voice patterns to create a comfortable atmosphere. Always look for nonverbal clues, such as the person looking nervous or intimidated and put the person at ease. Stay focused on the person speaking through eye contact, paraphrasing what was just said and nodding your head. Always let the person finish before you speak. Tell someone about the conversation, and you will remember it better.

If colleagues reach out to you, be sure that you always respond (e.g., answer the e-mails you receive); otherwise they will think you are not interested.

Organizing your network. If you have met someone before, do not assume that person remembers you, so take the time to reintroduce yourself and indicate where you met him or her. You probably will not have to reintroduce yourself again. To ensure people remember you after a meeting has ended, e-mail them

and thank them for spending time with you.

Prioritize your network contacts as follows: group A: those people who can assist you in advancing your career through their networks and experience; group B: colleagues who have similar responsibilities to you; and group C: those who might be helpful sometime in the future. When another professional meeting approaches, think about your professional network and, before the meeting, set up breakfast, dinner, or drinks with key people you want to stay in contact with from your groups A and B. Never hesitate to ask people for advice. It is a compliment to them that you value their opinion.

If you have nonwork local people in your groups A and B, seek them out for lunch or dinner. Get to know them, not only professionally but on a personal level, and share information about yourself. Through these people you are accessing their network. It is important to periodically keep in touch through e-mails or phone calls with key people in your groups A and B by telling them how your career is going and asking advice. As your network grows, introduce colleagues to each other and seek out students and young practitioners and link them to your network as appropriate. Never hesitate to contact anyone in your network if you have a question or need advice. Actively participate in professional organization listservers by sharing your expertise, and pay attention to the names you see on the listserver since you may meet them at a professional meeting and you will already have a common interest. Provide new information, such as articles and websites that you come across, to appropriate colleagues in your network. If you make a career change, do not hesitate to let the people in your network know and provide them with your new contact information.

Often professional meeting handout materials will contain a list of attendees

with contact information. Maintain these in a file because they may be helpful later. Another way to develop new skills and network is to actively participate in professional organizations by serving on committees and boards of directors and holding elected offices. There are opportunities at the local, state, and national levels, and all you need to do is volunteer but you must take the first step.

Establish a specific written professional network goal, such as to meet x number of nonwork colleagues this year. Being vague, such as “enlarge my professional network,” is not nearly as effective as being specific. Putting things in writing enhances the chance of their achievement. Write out an action plan that includes the steps that you need to take to reach your goal. Be specific as to what, when, and how you will accomplish your goal (e.g., attending the fall professional meeting). Include dates and a timeline. Periodically review your goal, action plan, and progress. At the end of the year, write out your accomplishments and list the times and reasons you have accessed your professional network. Update your goal and plan for the next year.

Suggested readings

- Burg B. *Endless referrals. Network your everyday contacts into sales.* New York: McGraw Hill; 2006.
- Fine D. *The power of meeting new people. Start conversations, keep them going, build rapport, develop friendships, and expand business.* Hummelstown, PA: Possibility Press; 2005.
- Johnson R, Eaton J. *Essential managers influencing people.* New York: DK Publishers; 2002.

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