

Making Time for Relationships

Question

I have my hands full just keeping up with my current clients and meeting short-term delivery pressures. How do I find the time to invest in long term relationship building?

Answer

This is one of the most common questions I am asked by my clients. Relationship building is, I think, analogous to diet and exercise. How many of us have made resolutions to eat better, exercise, and lose weight? We all have. And how many of us met our goals to our complete satisfaction? Very few of us. Why? Because diet and exercise is not a one-off event! Healthy living requires discipline and short-term sacrifices. You have to do small things every day. It's not so much lack of knowledge—the basics of losing weight are pretty well known—as it is lack of will and commitment. 85% of people who lose weight on a diet eventually gain it back—a depressing statistic. “Dieting” doesn't really work—we need to make permanent changes in the way we live.

Becoming skilled and consistent at relationship building, in short, requires a lifestyle change. But not a radical a one—I think it's probably easier than working out every day and forgoing all that fresh baked bread with butter. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Start by working on your mindset and attitude: Make a commitment to elevating the quality of your relationships to the same level as your professional mastery.
2. Focus on a handful of relationships, not every name in your contact database.
3. Set aside time each week to focus on your relationship-building efforts. This could be two hours every Friday morning, or something small that you do every day (e.g., call someone, send an article, write a note, make a lunch appointment, ask for a referral, etc.).
4. Create small rituals, such sending a thank-you card to clients after you give a speech, or writing a short summary of every client meeting that you send to the participants the next day.
5. Get others to help you. Work with your personal assistant so that he/she develops the same mindset and focus. Use your PA or EA to extend your reach and help keep track of key individuals—turn him or her into a “relationship marketing manager” instead of just a secretary or assistant. Get your team involved, so that every one working on a client engagement has relationship-building responsibilities.
6. Build relationships in a way that is consistent with your character, personality, and style. If you're introverted, fine—focus on one-on-one interactions, not loud dinner events. If you're not comfortable with cold calls, don't do them—always get a warm introduction if that is possible. If you don't like sports, fine—relate to your clients along other dimensions such as family and your hobbies.
7. Try to communicate with your broader network of contacts in a way that is efficient and conserves time. I have, for example, my web site, my monthly newsletter (“Client Loyalty”), and once a year I usually send a copy of an article I have written out to several hundred clients. Other people like to send warm, personalized holiday greetings in December, putting a short note in each one. Email is gaining currency for just about everything, including holiday cards, but real investment and effort is required to keep your lists current. There is also no substitute for the occasional, personalized communication sent through the mail.