



Making The Most Of Your Relationships

article by Michael Smolens ©2010

The Business Of Networking

We often hear about the importance of meeting new people that might be interested in our services. Because modern citizens have so much access to your competition through the internet, your most potent opportunities will come about from meeting perspective clients one-on-one, in-the-flesh. A networking organization that I belong to, BNI (Business Network International), recommends a minimum of eight hours of networking per week. In the face of the many ups and down that artists face, this may feel like climbing a mountain every day.

Speaking with people who don't know you has its own rewards, including facing head-on all of your insecurities about your image, your product(s) and/or service(s), and being in new environments. I'm sure you've heard artists say, "I just don't believe in 'selling', my art speaks for itself." Or, "I know I should let more people know about my art, I just don't have it in me." *I've never met an artist who said that part of their art training included becoming an effective communicator about their art.* Haven't we all had the experience of being held captive by someone who came on too strong with a sales pitch, or a performance that felt like it was a pretext for selling? And don't we simultaneously detest and admire those ingenious commercials on TV? Life was simpler when the most we had to endure was a cute little girl knocking on our door wanting to sell us Girl Scout cookies, or a teenage boy asking if we wanted to subscribe to the local newspaper.

Yet what I have noticed is that we often do not fully appreciate the opportunities that lie waiting for us in the various communities that already know us. Most artists circulate in a minimum of a half dozen different circles—family/partner(s)/roommate(s), neighbors, co-workers, local stores, suppliers, collaborators, peers, sports or physical activities, a religious or spiritual group, and so on. Just try writing down the various circles you travel in and everyone who belongs to each group, you'll be surprised at how many people you actually interact with on a regular or semi-regular basis.

I'm going to illustrate the importance of networking within communities that you're already known with three stories taken from my own performing experience in the last several years.

Example 1: A Flying Trapeze On New Year's Eve

Like many experienced musicians, on the majority of New Year's Eves I would be performing either solo or with a small group. On NYE of 2007 I played solo at a restaurant in Palo Alto California and received \$350. Despite my best efforts, as December 2008 approached I found myself without a confirmed booking. What I decided to do was find out if one of my favorite friends (who frequently puts on parties) was hosting a New Year's Eve celebration. Having been to many of his parties in the past, and having performed at them as well, I thought, "Well, if I don't get work this NYE, I might as well have as much fun as possible!"

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And his parties *were* fun—fabulous arrays of potluck delicacies, vintage art posters and masks from around the world, and some of the nicest and most creative folks you could imagine.

The host told me that I was more than welcome to attend and also asked if I could bring my PA system along with my portable keyboard for various parts of the evening. “Be happy to,” I replied, recalling some of the wilder New Year’s Eves at his earlier residences. I thought, just in case, I should also bring my book of original tunes, my alto flute, and some hand percussion for a changes in musical texture.

What transpired musically over those six hours was rather remarkable, like a multi-course meal that only royalty from a faraway land could experience. It began with myself and another musician accompanying a Sufi movement mediation (*zikhr*) for about an hour. This set the stage for some beautiful poetry from that tradition (think languid alto flute playing). After a short break, the environment completely shifted and I was asked to accompany a variety of different artists, most of whom I had never met. Given that the host was an internationally touring variety artist, it was only natural that he and a partner would begin this next portion with an hysterical juggling routine (think twisted circus music). Next, a remarkable bubble artist (*yes, bubble artist*) created the most enchanting and surreal shapes that you could imagine with bubbles, including putting a 10-year-old in a bubble (think early 20th century French impressionistic music). Then I was requested to play one of my pieces, to which I asked “You mean something that I don’t make up on-the-spot,” to which the host said, “Of course.” Last but not least, a leotarded gymnast began to swing on a trapeze, coming within inches of my head as I played and sang (think Brazilian samba alternating with up-tempo swing and satirical lyrics).

When I recall the many performances that I have done over the decades, this one stands as one of the most satisfying—completely improvised, covering a wide range of styles on multiple instruments, for an ultra-attentive audience. I received plenty of enthusiastic comments from audience members who knew of me but who weren’t aware of the range of what I do, and so I made several new connections with inspiring performers and gave away business cards.

As I was packing up all of my equipment, I was still in a daze when the host came over to thank me and handed me a fist-full of cash, at which I looked with amazement. “Sorry if it’s not what you usually get on New Year’s Eve, but we all really enjoyed what you did.” To which I replied, “No, you don’t understand. I already got paid way more than any other New Year’s Eve gig could ever pay. I already made a major deposit in my *Artistic Bank Account...*”

(A similar situation occurred recently when I requested to sit-in as a guest player at a dance event. As I was packing up, the bandleader thanked me for playing and handed me payment that likewise caught me completely off-guard).

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Example 2: A Sacred New Year's Eve

The following year resulted in my playing on New Year's Eve, but through a different avenue. In the fall of 2009 I decided to record three new solo piano arrangements of traditional carols in preparation for getting more Christmas engagements. I thought that I should not only put these works on my website, but also send them to every musical person that I knew as a Holiday greeting and gift. It was nice to get thanks and positive feedback about the recordings (not even my sharpest friends could tell that it was done on a digital keyboard), but one day in early December of that year I received an email from someone who received my holiday recording. It said, "By golly, I forgot to get my New Year's Eve church service covered. Are you free that night? And by the way, nice arrangements."

It turns out that that person knew me rather well—he has been a member of one of my ensembles for nearly seven years. He knew that I was familiar with that church's musical and philosophical approach and so he felt confident about his invitation to me. Fortunately, all of the feedback from that night was positive, so it was a win-win situation for everyone. Even though this church service did not start out as a volunteer effort like the two scenarios mentioned above, I was amazed at how very close to home my point of contact was, as well as our stylistic compatibility.

Example 3: A Reverend's Ordination

I have been performing regularly at my church for nearly four years when the junior minister asked me to play for his Ordination. Because he was familiar with my playing and my range of styles, it was very easy for him to pick out three pieces that he needed for the event. The day after I received his invitation, I called him and challenged him to create *his own piece* for his Ordination. I reminded him that he had already created a very compelling opening fragment in my Chant Writing Workshop which he attended six months earlier. The Reverend not only hired me to play for the event, he also took the challenge I mentioned and hired me to co-compose his chant, a process that spanned nearly four full sessions. (For a more complete description of this project, see my article entitled, "Making The Phone Your *Student Value Amplifier*-Part II.")

Watching Your Relationships Grow

The three case studies above hopefully illuminated the financial power of long-term relationships. Now, what do all three of these opportunities have in common? **They all evolved over an extended period of time and embodied multiple interests.**

In the first example, I had known the variety artist through my spiritual community for 15 years. I'd also accompanied him in the past, and he was even the brother of someone I once dated. In the second example, the fellow keyboardist had been in one of my original music ensembles for seven years. We had also performed in more 'casual' settings in different combinations. In the last example, my relationship with the Reverend had grown over the last four years and encompassed numerous roles: as a *listener*, as a *student*, as a *patron*, and also as an *attendee* of several of my concerts.

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Looking Back, Looking Forward

Assuming we want to make most relationships long-term, why doesn't each interaction turn into a life-long relationship? If you were to examine any relationship in your life, whether it was with a roommate, bandmate, employer, or lover, you'll see a rich and sometimes bewildering history. The chances are, though, that the more distance you have on any particular relationship the more you'll detect its logic—the very reason why that person or opportunity presented itself and whether or not it worked out for you. There have been many occasions when I have felt frustrated at losing the opportunity to work with someone who I thought might make a great fit, only to see in hindsight that working with them would have been a big mistake. The expression, "*Their rejection is your protection,*" seems to capture that sentiment clearly.

Needless to say, not all of your musical relationships are meant to be long-term. Like dating, some will be very brief, some will flourish for a while, and some will be more long-term. The central question is this: ***Are you looking forward to cultivating this particular relationship for an extended period of time?*** With regard to that question, my feelings surrounding the three persons noted in this article were a resounding **Yes**. Besides continually running into the variety artist at concerts, he is simply great fun to be around. The keyboardist is not only the funniest storyteller I know, he has always been very generous with his advice over the years. And I have always found the Reverend's presence to be warm and embracing. By staying open to new possibilities, while being available and generous, you will be richly rewarded by your relationships in ways you could not have possibly imagined.