



HOW KEVIN BACON CAN GET YOU A JOB

Recently, my husband and I were at a dinner party when someone suggested a trivia game called “Six Degrees of Separation”. The game originated from an offhand remark Kevin Bacon made in an interview years ago that he had been in so many films that he either knew everyone in Hollywood or was no more than 6 degrees of separation from everyone in the industry. It’s evolved over time into a joking kind of reference that everyone in the world is only 6 degrees of separation away from Kevin Bacon. As the night unfolded, we learned that the chef who was catering the dinner party (Chef Matteo www.4coursevegan.com) regularly serves as chef for Kevin Bacon and his family – putting all of us at the table in the “2nd degree” category (ie we know Matteo and he knows Kevin). I was dreaming of getting my closet-screenplay writing career off the ground!

It got me thinking about how this parlor game might apply in our industry. Certainly, websites like LinkedIn, FaceBook, Doostang and Plaxo have all capitalized on the social networking scene. Like me, each of you probably receives dozens of invitations each week to get “linked” or otherwise connect to other people through social networking sites. But, is it really enough to network online? And is networking online really “networking” that can make a difference in your job search?

Personally, I’m still an advocate for networking in a more traditional sense – meeting people and building relationships. To me, sending out your resume in an email blast or just linking through a social networking site isn’t really networking – it’s a hologram that seems like networking but isn’t. I think about networking as more than just a way to build a contact database to mine or as resources to be exploited in finding a job. To me, networking is the fine art of building alliances, connecting people and mentoring others and it’s part of my daily life, not just my business life. Recruiters are the original social networkers!

Networking happens when you’re having a drink at a cocktail party, when you volunteer at the PTA or chat with the parents of your kids’ teammates at the soccer field, as you strike up a conversation with the guy fixing your dishwasher, the lady next to you in the eye doctor’s waiting room when the doctor is backed up or your seatmate on a flight. Networking is social, it’s casual and it’s about connecting with everyone you meet without expectation of “getting something in return”. It’s not just about collecting business cards or “friends” on your FaceBook or LinkedIn page. Real networking is about connecting on the human level and recognizing the simple fact that we’re all six degrees away from everyone else and there are lots of ways to be helpful to each other.

Some people mistakenly believe that networking is only useful if the person they're talking to can offer them something immediately. I see it at conferences when the badges are color coded – one color means “equity sponsor”, another color means “intermediary”, another color means “service provider”. Billed as a way for participants to maximize their networking time by only talking to the people they can “do a deal with” it misses the real point of networking, which is that everyone knows someone who knows someone who might be helpful to you. And people help people they know and like.

When I was practicing law, I used to tell my young lawyers that they should never lead off a conversation with “Hi, I’m so-and-so, I’m a lawyer and here’s my card.” I counseled them to just be themselves, be sociable, get to know the people around them at an event. Eventually the other person will ask you what you do and the reality is that people like to do business with people they like and who they feel comfortable with. Likewise, in your networking efforts, be yourself, be personable, find the things you have in common with the people you meet and how you can be helpful to them. We’re all in this human experience together and you’d be surprised how much all of us (regardless of our station in life) have in common. Networking is a give and take relationship and starting it off by being a “taker” is the wrong way to network. Don’t just send an email with your resume asking for a job or a referral and think that’s “networking”. What are you offering as part of the relationship?

There was a movie several years ago titled “Pay it Forward” (no, Kevin Bacon wasn’t in it) and the premise was practicing random acts of kindness without expectation of payback would create a kind of good “karma” that would benefit both the recipient and the giver of the kindness. Your networking efforts should have that tone to them. My housekeeper doesn’t just clean my house, she cleans dozens of houses each month. Isn’t it likely that she will meet someone who might know someone who might have something to offer me? Am I kind to her just because I want her to pass along my business card or resume to someone else? No! I am kind to her because it’s the way I want to live my life and I assume that her knowing of my plight (say, looking for a job) she might mention it to someone who could ultimately be helpful to me. Recently, I had a contractor at my house when she was cleaning – he knew her by sight because she also cleans house for one of his other clients, the marketing director of a large media company whose husband is CFO of a restructuring firm. I didn’t know that my housekeeper knew them, but it reminded me how small the world is and how easy it is to assume that our worlds don’t intersect. She and I are connected not just because of the economic relationship we have, we’re connected because I know her as a person and she knows me the same way – we have respect for each other and a kind, personal, although casual, relationship. Who knows where being respectful and building relationships can lead you?

I spoke to a woman in the vet’s office last week when my dog was having some surgery. We made small talk while we were waiting and it turns out that she wanted to give her husband a mountain bike for his upcoming birthday. I happened to have met a fellow at the pool in my community two weeks ago who used to own a bike shop in the area and I

offered to send her an email with his contact information thinking he might offer her some guidance on what kind of bike to buy. He was thrilled because he had a custom bike building business on the side and when he called to thank me, we were talking about his business and how he was looking for a seed investor to help build the business. I introduced him to a vc investor I knew who would be interested in that kind of transaction and, in the discussion with the investor, I learned that they were looking for an associate because they just raised a new fund. See how casually offering to help someone turned into opportunity for me? And, I wasn't looking for it, I was just doing what comes naturally – connecting people.

Who knows whether the waitress at your favorite diner or the receptionist at the dentist's office could be the keystone networking introduction to your next career move? At the very least, looking for ways to offer help to the people you meet, real honest-to-goodness networking and relationship building, will enhance your life while you're looking for your new job. Maybe you'll end up being an extra in Kevin Bacon's next film!