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Some Experiences Cannot Be Had at a Distance: The Importance of Face-to-Face Settings for Building Professional Networking Skills

Kendra Harris
Marketing Consultant, KLHarris2000@aol.com

Jacqueline A. Williams
North Carolina A&T State University, jacq@ncat.edu

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Kendra Harris, Marketing Consultant

klharris2000@aol.com

Jacqueline A. Williams, North Carolina A& T State University

jacq@ncat.edu

Abstract - Marketing education is an area in which students not only learn the discipline, they learn how to "market themselves" to achieve professional goals and objectives. It is particularly important that this group of young professionals are explicitly forced out of their "social media" mindsets and into a venue of explicit face-to-face human interaction. Without this "in-the-flesh" experience, they could become more entrenched in their cyber-worlds, remaining oblivious to the fact that in-person interaction is not always as intimidating as they might perceive, but does require initiative on their part. This paper describes the development of a professional networking event designed to enhance students' soft skills. Responses from participants of the event highlight the degree to which face-to-face interaction between professionals and students is an unrivaled learning tool.

Keywords - distance learning, pedagogy, experiential learning, fundraising, development, student professional development, alumni relations, corporate and academic partnerships, business education

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and/or Practitioners - A formal networking dinner is a useful tool for bringing together students and professionals. With the current generation of students comfortably operating via social media, the structured face-to-face networking venue demonstrated that students and professionals alike benefit because of its traditional application of soft skills and business protocols.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the benefits provided to business school students of participating in professional networking activities in order to enhance their job seeking abilities and competency in face-to-face communications. To some degree, the popularity and validation of Linkedin has reinforced the idea of the high efficiency and effectiveness of virtual connections, including for the purpose of making professional contacts. In contrast to the growing use of technology-aided networking, this paper discusses ways in which the face-to-face interaction that takes place in a physical networking environment is unparalleled in providing students with the practice they need at honing their soft skills through practice at networking. The development of the networking activity and its execution provides benefits for both students and professionals. Lessons learned from the activity are discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Networking

"Networking" in a job search context is defined as 'individual actions directed towards contacting friends, acquaintances, and other people to whom the job seeker has been referred for the main purpose of getting information, leads, or advice on getting a job' (Wanberg, C. R., Kanfer, R., and Banas, J.T. 2000). At a very basic level, social network theory suggests that the characteristics of one's network can influence the outcomes of networking. Hence social network theory identifies structure and composition as key elements of social networks (Adler and Kwon 2002; Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, and Tsai 2004; Burt 1992, 1997; Granovetter, 1973, 1995; Lin, 1999; Mouw, 2003).

In addition to the benefits to the job seeker, networking functions afford potential employers the opportunity to have a succinct mechanism for observing multitudes of employee prospects. The fact that job developers (creators) are very interested in expanding their networking activities is an idea that is perhaps not as well appreciated by those who are seeking the jobs (particularly college students). In fact students have an understandable degree of apprehension about facing business executives in a networking arena. Pempek et al (2009) studied college students' social networking activity. They found that college students used Facebook in particular for their one-to-many style interactions with their connections. However, the study found that the students spent more time in observation mode on Facebook than on actually engaging in prolonged periods of interaction. Of note as well, is the fact that college students rarely interact with individuals with whom they were not previously acquainted offline.

The theory of weak ties has shown that "weak" networks among professionals can be as effective as more strong ties (Villar, Juan, Corominas and Capell 2000; LaGesse 2009). In fact, in some instances those who have used weak networks to find positions have found jobs making more money and gaining more job satisfaction than some who used strong networks (Villar et al. 2000). Hence, those who appreciate the power of networking recognize that job seekers and developers must work together at networking in order to leverage employment opportunities (Owens and young 2008).

Professional networking activities in college provide students with a realistic view of how they will perform "in the real world," when they are seeking employment. They can learn to understand that participation in the networking event is not enough (Hoye, van Hooft, and Lievens 2009). One key aspect of networking is to build relationships (Thomas 2012). This means that the job seeker must work hard to present himself well, establish a rapport, gain the respect of those with whom he is networking, and work to build that relationship.

Some business programs have added a dimension to their curricula that specifically focuses on business and university partnerships. One example of such partnerships is Columbia University's Business School's W. Edwards Deming Center for Quality, Productivity, and Competitiveness (Fraiman 2002). Other business schools like the one at Oakland University focus on university and industry partnerships for the purpose of enhancing their students' soft skills. Oakland University established a curriculum it called ACHIEVE which consists of courses that require students to complete a set of tasks including; attending a student organization meeting, networking with professionals, and participating in a job fair (Majeske and Serocki 2009).

When schools have been successful at attracting and maintaining relationships with employers who continue to use their institution as a source for finding employees, those potential employees (students) need to be prepared to interact with those employers. One form of this interaction needs to come in the form of formal networking activities.

In the past, the argument for students needing to have exposure to establishing those connections in the flesh has not been made so clear. Furthermore, even when these students have an opportunity to be in an arena to make these connections, their ability to achieve the objectives of making a good impression and establishing a foundation for building on their networks has not been reviewed. Imparting these skills and knowledge arguably cannot be accomplished online in the same way it can be done face-to-face.

Experiential Learning

Although clearly there are myriad ways to bring students and industry together, arguably there are few if any ways that rival having students and industry leaders physically assemble in one place for the purpose of students networking to build their business community affiliations. Having students engage in an activity that affords them this form of interaction is a type of experiential learning. "Experiential learning theory defines learning as the process where knowledge is created through concrete experience and abstract conceptualization, and transformed through reflective observation and active experimentation in a cyclical manner that continues until the conclusion of the project" (Kolb, 1984).
Undergraduate college students in general and business students in particular pursue their collegiate education, in part with the goal of finding employment at the end of their undergraduate course of study. Because these students fall under the domain of "professional schools," they are eligible to assume entry level positions requiring a

certain level of maturity and business sophistication. For many employers, gone are the days in which new hires are brought in, and trained by the hiring company in the area of basic business concepts.

To the contrary, today's employers are looking for career ready candidates who can make substantive contributions to an organization upon their arrival. In that regard, more-and-more responsibility has been placed on universities to be as comprehensive as possible in preparing its business students for the work world. Doing so places tremendous responsibility on universities to have numerous activities in place that will prepare their young graduates for success in the business world from day one. There are plenty of data points to support the idea that "community connection" and industry links are essential to many individuals' success in the 21st century (Weisblat and Sell 2012).

These activities include ensuring that the basic business curricula are relevant to the needs of employers, operating effective placement offices, and providing course content and activities that enhance professional development and the mastery of soft skills. Today's universities are at various levels of being comprehensive in preparing their students with respect to professional development and soft skills. One of the components of a comprehensive professional development curriculum, is building relationships with industry, and facilitating interaction between business students and industry.

At any given time and particularly during times of economic downturns in the economy, job seekers (e.g. recent college graduates) need to be adept at utilizing all the tools necessary to effectively execute a successful job search process. Part of a complete strategy for a job search involves leveraging networking activities. The idea of developing soft skills in students is not one that is a priority in many business curricula. Many schools focus on the technical aspects of specific disciplines, and leave the "soft skill" learning to students' individual ingenuity. Soft skills in general tend not to get a lot of formal attention in university curricula.

Being effective at networking, not unlike any other skill, requires understanding of the concept and practice. Although "social networking" has taken on multiple dimensions in the professional world (e.g. Linkedin), this type of virtual networking can still be improved based on gaining insights into the networking process, and practice in face-to-face settings.

Distance Education

When considering providing instruction on networking via an experiential learning activity, one key question becomes whether providing this type of training can be optimally done in a virtual environment. Instruction on networking that is delivered via a distance mechanism can be useful for providing background information on the networking process and outlining the basic tenets of networking. However, there are aspects of business networking that require training and practice for which no delivery mechanism could accurately rival face-to-face interaction. This runs counter to the trend in higher education of providing courses at a distance.

According to the United States Distance Learning Association, distance

education is defined as, the 'acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance' (Bowser and Hardy 2004). Distance course delivery can be characterized as an aspect of the grid of time/place intersection (Johansen et al. 1991). That model indicates that education delivery can be characterized as falling into one of four quadrants in a two by two matrix. The education delivery is, same time/same place (traditional classroom), same time/different place (remote delivery; video or phone conference), same place/different time (e.g. instructional lab), different place/different time (e.g. independent study).

The same time/same place quadrant is one that can provide the most comprehensive and esoteric instruction and practice regarding networking. As this paper will ultimately demonstrate, these are the specific characteristics of networking that are beneficial to job seekers as well as employers that are difficult (if not impossible) to realize unless the activity is face-to-face and synchronous.

The following section describes the project and the subsequent section provides the methods and results from surveys completed by participants who attended the networking event. Outcomes reveal ways in which students and professionals alike, were enlightened.

THE NETWORKING PROJECT

This paper outlines a class project that was developed and executed at a southeastern university in the United States. The project was built as a class activity that was part of the final grade for a professional selling course. The purpose of the project was for the class to function in a project management style to execute a professional networking event. The event entailed a professional networking reception at a local hotel, followed by a sit-down dinner with a limited program. The benefits of the project were to enhance professional development training for the students through an experiential learning activity, while also building industry and community partnerships with the university. Finally, fundraising was also an essential objective.

The networking project grew from an initial collaboration with a Fortune 500 corporation that developed relationships with a limited set of business schools that had sales education as an important part of their undergraduate curriculum. The company ultimately provided a $25,000 grant to the southeastern university. This grant provided the seed money for the networking project.

A faculty member in the marketing discipline at the university who was facilitating building a sales curriculum had complete stewardship over the funds. She began to think of ways in which the funds could directly enhance the development of its sales curriculum, its students, and the business school overall, while also thinking of ways to leverage the funds to attract other corporate sponsors and resources to the institution.

One of the things the business school had previously created and instituted into its overall course requirements was a professional development curriculum. This curriculum focused on building and enhancing students' soft skills (i.e. interviewing, business etiquette, professional attire). The idea of leveraging the corporate grant

to provide an experiential learning opportunity that helped students practice their soft skills seemed to be a winning strategy for students in the marketing discipline, students in the business school overall, the university in general, as well as the professional community.

The key idea that evolved that provided a winning strategy for a variety of constituents was a networking reception and dinner. The event would be held off campus at a nearby hotel, and would provide the students the opportunity to get away from campus in a real world, authentic professional business setting, where they could practice their soft skills, specifically those soft skills that needed to be invoked when engaging in a professional networking activity.

The activity was developed and grew over a four year period. For the first year, the professional development class was tasked with attending a business dinner at that nearby hotel. The dinner was a sit-down dinner preceded by a punch reception. Students had gained business etiquette training while enrolled in their professional selling class during the semester. The business etiquette lectures taught the students appropriate ways to interact with professionals at a reception while navigating around any refreshments that might be provided. That is, they were informed that networking receptions are meant for meeting and greeting, not for eating. The etiquette training also provided guidance on how to conduct one's self during a sit-down dinner that involved a multiple course meal that had a table setting consisting of several pieces of flatware and a few types of beverages (e.g. water, iced tea, hot coffee).

The first year the "practice" business dinner took place was very well received by the students. They expressed that they benefited from having to dress professionally to go to a formal setting to have a sit-down dinner. They especially found value in being confronted with a dinner place setting that had multiple utensils among which they had to navigate. However, the students who participated that first year, made it clear that because that first event involved only them, and their professor, the experience lacked the "real world" aspect of interacting with outside professionals.

The second year the event took place, a couple dozen outside professionals were invited to attend. Once again, the students in the professional selling class were the only students in attendance. A student from the class was selected to coordinate much of the planning including interacting with the hotel, and developing a program. The professionals were delighted to have received the invitations and have an opportunity to "network" with students. The professionals were invited as "guests" to the event (at no cost to the professionals). Companies represented at the event included an international computer firm, a national insurance company, and a local non-profit economic development organization. The professionals were each granted two minutes to impart their "words of wisdom" to the students.

By all accounts, the second event was a tremendous success. The students benefited from the interaction with the professionals and the professionals were delighted to have been invited to share their professional wisdom with the students. The groundwork had been laid to grow the event to a targeted one hundred participants, incorporating students outside of the professional selling class, and an expanded invitation list of professionals, as well as university administrators, faculty, and staff.

In that next year (the third year), the professional selling class was restructured so that the class requirement incorporated students taking primary responsibility for the planning and execution of the entire event. Hence, a substantive part of the class included a project management style activity, whereby students were assigned a variety of tasks needed to bring the activity to fruition. Key student leadership roles included; project manager, guest/invitation chair, venue chair, program chair, and host/hostess chair. In addition, the Student Professional Development office was invited to be co-hosts of the event. They gladly came on board, and subsequently sponsored the pre-reception to the dinner, and provided the token trinkets (paper weights) to the professional guests.

The leadership team in that class took their tasks to heart. They utilized the business school's professional development office, the university's placement office, and the university's student community service office to try to reach as many outside professionals as they could. As a result of all the effort, approximately 125 guests confirmed that they would be attending. The participants included students, school personnel, and industry professionals. The pre-reception was enhanced to include vegetable and cheese trays, in addition to the punch. In addition, the students held a short program during the sit-down dinner, at which time, they gave the history of the event, and made a "soft-sell" pitch to the audience to solicit financial donors and sponsors to ensure the continual growth and development of the activity. As a result of the quality of the event, and the subtle solicitation for financial support of subsequent annual networking events, a few professionals went away with plans to make financial commitments to the event for its continuation in upcoming years.

As plans were being made for the next year's event, other enhancements were underway. The objectives for the next year were to double its size, execute a campaign for attracting sponsors, and provide a scholarship to a student. All of those objectives were met. A small business platinum sponsor was acquired for $5,000 which carried with it a $1,000 scholarship to a student. (The owner of the platinum sponsoring business delivered a keynote address for the occasion.) The field organization of a national insurance firm provided $1,000. In addition, the faculty member coordinating the event also teamed up with a faculty colleague from a neighboring university. The result was that the National Sales Foundation contributed $1,000 to the event. Furthermore, twenty five students and the faculty colleague from the neighboring university attended the event.

Students from the host university's art department displayed their work, and students from the music department played live jazz music while patrons dined. In addition, the class that organized the event that year added their own enhancements that noticeably increased the overall quality of the event. One of the enhancements was that they solicited a nearby United States Army Reserve unit to provide in-kind services of photography and videography for the night. The photography service afforded the opportunity to give each guest a picture of themselves to take home.

METHODS AND RESULTS

At the last networking event, students and professionals were administered surveys. There were two different surveys provided. One survey was for students and the other survey was for the professionals. Both surveys consisted of questions that were scored on a ten point likert scale.

Exhibits 1 and 2 provide mean scores for items that were based on the likert scale of 0 to 10. Zero represented that the respondent did not agree at all with the item. Ten represented that the respondent totally agreed with the item. Sixty five students and forty nine professionals completed the surveys. Both students and professionals indicated that the networking experience met their expectations, indicated by mean scores of 8.46 and 8.69 respectively. The students' survey score for, "Networking events help me be better prepared to meet other business professionals," was 8.85. The students' score for, "It is important that I attend networking events," was 9.23. The professionals' score on importance of attendance was 8.44. The professionals' score for, "Networking events are an essential company resource," was 8.98.

Exhibit 1

Students' Responses

Question Number	Question	Mean Score for Question*
1.	The networking experience met my expectations	8.46
2.	The networking experience was different from what I expected	6.12
3.	I gained a lot from the networking experience	7.90
4.	There's a difference between formal networking activity and an interview experience	8.51
5.	I had sufficient interaction time for networking as compared to when I am formally interviewing	8.00
6.	I experienced the same amount of nervousness at networking events as I do at formal interviews	4.87
7.	I share as much background information about myself at networking events as I do at formal interviews	6.15
8.	I can find out as much information about the person I'm interacting with at the networking events as I do at formal interviews	6.43
9.	Networking events help me better prepared to meet other business professionals	8.85
10.	It is important that I attend networking events	9.23
11.	Networking events help me gain company information	8.39
12.	I should wear the same attire at networking events that I wear for formal interviews	8.31

* Scores based on likert scale of 0-10, whereby 0 was "I don't agree at all" and 10 was "I totally agree."

Exhibit 2
Professionals' Responses

Question Number	Question	Mean Score for Question*
1.	The networking experience met my expectations	8.69
2.	The networking experience was different from what I expected	5.37
3.	I gained a lot from the networking experience	7.73
4.	There's a difference between formal networking activity and an interview experience	8.87
5.	I had sufficient interaction time for networking as compared to when I am formally conducting an interviewing	7.91
6.	I impart as much company information at networking events as I would when I'm formally interviewing	6.58
7.	I ask the same types of questions at networking events as I do at formal interviews	5.83
8.	I can find out as much information about the person I'm interacting with at the networking events as I do at formal interviews	6.37
9.	It is important that I attend networking events to prospect for applicants	8.44
10.	It is important that I attend networking events to prospect for applicants	8.98

* Scores based on likert scale of 0-10, whereby 0 was "I don't agree at all" and 10 was "I totally agree."

Students were given an opportunity to describe what they anticipated before attending the event. Their responses indicated that they had some preconceived notions about the event that were not always true. Some key insights were that they thought it would have been more difficult for them to grab the interest of the professionals, and that the ability to mingle would have been more difficult. Some students learned that there are always things to say about themselves when they are trying to make an impression on professionals. Many students did not know what to expect, which is an indication that they needed to have the experience.

Other insights gained with respect to the students' experiences were that some had not previously appreciated the value of having their own business cards and being able to hand them out on professional occasions such as the networking event. Many students lamented the fact that they had not brought copies of their resumes. There were numerous students who were very unclear about appropriate business etiquette and appreciated the opportunity to learn in a non-threatening, yet professional environment. Some of those students also gained better insight into why a firm handshake is key in professional interactions.

Out of the sixty five students who responded to a question regarding what they expected to gain from the experience, 90.76% of them yearned for the "practice" of interacting in a professional setting. Numerous students were surprised at the degree to which they had to "compete" for the attention of the professionals with whom they wanted to speak. Students also expressed sentiments such as, not sharing

as much as they would have liked, being shy, and not taking full advantage of the opportunity.

The industry professionals were generally pleased with the event. They particularly liked having the opportunity to see tomorrow's workforce. They were impressed by the professionalism of the students with respect to how they were dressed. The business professionals also especially appreciated the fact that the event was organized and executed by students and that students from a neighboring university were well represented at the event. In addition, the fact that there were art students and music students there demonstrating their talent, was a plus.

The survey also revealed that the industry professionals had some points of disappointment. They particularly noticed that some students were shy, and that the professionals had to approach some of the students, as opposed to the students showing initiative to introduce themselves. This was a point that the keynote speaker addressed as well. He implored the students to recognize that the burden is on them to initiate contact with professionals at a networking event, and that students needed to be prepared to talk about their goals, objectives, and accomplishments in a way that makes them competitive candidates in the job market. This sentiment was reflected in some professionals suggesting that students should be given specific quantifiable objectives in making contact with professionals at such events.

DISCUSSION

The activity did provide some insight with respect to students and some learning opportunities regarding the development of the activity. With respect to the students, it became evident that some students need guidance with respect to their understanding the meaning of "pursuing" a career or professional opportunities. That is, some students need more explicit direction in understanding how competitive the work place is, and that they need to be assertive in communicating their strengths, and their goals and objectives for a career. This enhanced knowledge can be imparted in the classroom or in seminars that can be a precursor to the networking event. Enhancing the event to incorporate such seminars has been a part of the discussion in anticipation of future events.

From insights provided by both students and professionals, it is apparent that the actual face-to-face interaction that is characterized by a networking event, provides experiences and learning that are unparalleled in a virtual environment. For instance, it would be difficult for students to understand the importance of a firm hand shake in a virtual setting. Some students also would not recognize the importance of having a business card or resume, and feel their competitive edge slip away because they are ill-prepared.

Every level of the evolution of this event proved to be successful and validating of the fact that these types of activities are highly valued by a variety of constituents. Clearly the students have consistently expressed the value of the activity. Moreover, in this era of social networking and virtual communities, the professionals expressed a great need for the activity. Specifically, the professionals scored nearly nine out of ten (8.98) in saying that networking events are an essential company resource.

These kinds of activities are increasingly needed in part because of the continuous reduction of the use of human resources in the United States job arena. Also, in the best of economic times, students need to get an authentic view of what it means to be competitive. (When student are at a gathering filled with other students, and often times seasoned professionals, who are all looking for jobs, they gain an appreciation for being competitive, that they might not have previously realized.) In an environment of particularly challenging economic times, these types of activities carry even more importance. Moreover, industry professionals are always seeking ways to have interaction with potential job candidates.

Managing the growth of the activity while maintaining its quality and supportive feel for the students, is also something that has to be explicitly managed. While having discussions with an organization that wanted to support the event, various format and programming options were proposed. The faculty coordinator thought it important to grow strategically, so as to not deviate from the purpose of the event, have the event grow too quickly, or dilute its quality and value.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As universities face the ongoing challenge of providing adequate job placement opportunities, and moreover ensuring that their graduates are maximally prepared to be successful in careers, activities such as the networking event will be useful tools for achieving that objective. This activity demonstrated that students and professionals alike benefit from the activity largely because of its face-to-face nature.

Some will argue that some students could benefit from having most, if not all of their post-secondary education course of study executed in a virtual environment. Jones University is an example of a university that offers its entire curriculum online to a world-wide student population (Stella and Gnanam 2004). Clearly a networking experience like the one outlined in this paper could not be had at a university that has no face-to-face instruction.

The proliferation of social network activities has also given rise to the perception that the ways of the traditional classroom or at the very least, face-to-face learning might be heading towards extinction. Media outlets such as Facebook have given rise to a generation whose culture has come to expect that its connections to other individuals can be managed almost exclusively through social media. To some degree, the popularity and validation of Linkedin has reinforced the idea of the high efficiency and effectiveness of virtual connections, including for the purpose of making professional contacts.

These virtual successes make it increasingly challenging for traditional aged college students to readily understand the value of face-to-face interaction and that even tools such as Facebook or Linkedin are not perfect surrogates for face-to-face interaction. This paper revealed that many students found it easier than they thought to initiate and maintain conversations with professionals whom they previously had not known. The cultural norm that is pervasive among many college aged students is one of completing as many tasks as possible via an online mechanism. It is particularly important that this group of young professionals are explicitly forced out of their

"social media" mindsets and into a venue of explicit face-to-face human interaction. Without this "in-the-flesh" experience, they could become more entrenched in their cyber-worlds, remaining oblivious to the fact that in-person interaction is not always as intimidating as they might perceive, but does require initiative on their part. Furthermore, it is essential that students develop the ability to engage in this type of interaction especially since the professionals view networking activities to be an important company resource.

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