Network to Learn!

For many people, networking is an uncomfortable activity that they engage in out of desperation or because “they are supposed to”. They think networking is all about contacting strangers, asking for favors or, even worse, asking for a job. They do not give adequate thought to what they are trying to accomplish or learn from their networking conversation and conduct very little research in advance about the person’s company or industry. All too frequently, this inappropriate approach and/or lack of preparation can result in a negative first impression that can be easily avoided. Here are a few suggestions that can help you feel more comfortable about conducting networking activities:

**Network to learn.** When contacting people initially, let them know what you want to accomplish in the conversation. Tell them that you are looking to learn more about their company, their job function, or their industry. Whether you are networking as part of a job search or networking to become more visible and connected in your company or industry, setting the stage up front will help your get off on the right foot.

**Don’t attach your resume to an initial email.** Attaching a resume to your initial email can give a “bait and switch” impression to your networking contact. With today’s complicated human resources policies, your contact may wonder why he/she is receiving your resume and worry that the receipt of your resume makes you an “official candidate” to the company and requires some special action. After you have exchanged a few emails and scheduled a time to talk, you can then send your resume with a statement in your email such as “Thanks so much for agreeing to talk with me on Friday. I realize that your time is at a premium, so I have attached my resume so you will have a better idea of my background prior to our conversation. That way, I won’t have to take up valuable time in our phone call describing my background.”

**Do your homework.** Research the person’s company before conducting any networking phone call or meeting. Ask questions in a way that makes it clear that you know a good deal about the company or industry already and want to know even more. I have heard from alumni over the years who have been very turned off by students and fellow alumni who clearly have done little or no research prior to their phone conversation or informational interview and expect to be told everything they need to know about the company in this brief conversation.

Networking is more than data collection. Talk to other students or alumni who now are working in your areas of interest. Ask questions like “what do you like most about your role?”, “How did you go about getting this role?”, and/or “Do you have any advice that help me move into a similar type of position?”. Conversations with people in these roles can help the information you are collecting “come alive”.

**Network in venues that match your personality.** If you don’t like approaching people you don’t know in public forums, you probably won’t feel comfortable trying to “work the room” at a conference, convention or large reception. If you don’t like making cold phone calls, make your initial contact through email. Matching your networking approach to your personality can help make the process feel much more comfortable.

I hope you have found this information to be helpful. To arrange an appointment, contact me at jworth2@vcu or at (804) 828-1465