The secrets of staying in touch

Knowing to how to build on that 'let's stay in touch' phrase is a vital connecting skill. There will be many occasions in your life when you've met somebody in a business or social setting and said the immortal words 'let's stay in touch'. The problem is that whilst most people genuinely mean it at the time they either don't have the commitment or the skills to take the relationship further. In the business context, sales people are very well aware that when people say to them 'well, that was interesting but I don't have budget right now… let's keep in touch' they have to really start working to understand what 'let's stay in touch' really means.

In this context it could be a polite way of letting the sales person down because the contact simply doesn't want the product or service. Or it could mean that the timing genuinely isn't right, or they are unsure about the benefits, and last, but by no means the least likely, it means exactly what the contact says… stay in touch.

The key to the connector's success in this context is to clarify what 'staying in touch' actually means. Sales people know never to invest in a long-term relationship unless they are pretty sure that there may be light at the end of the tunnel. So, the top connector might ask questions like :

- "Does that mean that, as soon as you had a budget, you'll be considering this project?"
- "Is the budget the only thing that's holding you back, or are there other factors to take into account?"
- "When does your new financial year start. What process do you go through to submit your budgets … can I help in any way?"
- "Is there anyone else you would need to consult in making this decision?"
- "What things do you look for in your supplier … who else are you talking you on this matter".
- (Critically), "what is the next step … and when will that take place"

The answers to the questions will give him a real insight into what 'let's stay in touch' means in this situation. Once you are sure that the relationship is worth developing you will want to remain lodged in the contact's mind so that when the time is right, yours is the number they'll call first for that piece of advice / product. This involves drip feeding your contact with relevant 'added value' nuggets of information to remind them of you and your offering. So far, so obvious. But here's an example of how it worked in practice.

A business consultant specialising in producing company promotional videos visited a large multi-national company to show his portfolio of recent work. One of the demo tapes was about the Egyptian treasures in a stately home. The prospective client was especially keen on that one – it transpired that Egyptian artefacts were his passion. The consultant offered to lend him the video tape.

This generous gesture then gave the consultant a reason to stay in touch with the contact. When the video was returned a couple of weeks later, they chatted about it and the consultant offered to lend him another he might enjoy … six months later the consultant won a lucrative contact to produce the new company video.

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Find an excuse to phone. Pass on snippets of information about events, new books, industry press features, statistics - even the phone number of a useful contact. Make sure that the information is relevant and valid. The approach will soon be seen through if you bombard your contact with irrelevant bumph.

A good 'litmus test' of progress being made is when your contact proactively sends you the odd piece of information but, as all good connectors know, in the initial stages of building a relationship it is much more important to give than to get. Don't expect, just because you've sent the odd piece of information to your contact, that they should reciprocate. You have to 'earn your spurs' first.

Experienced connectors know that it's not always easy to get through to folk these days, what with voice-mail, PA's and the general hurly burly of business life. It is not practical to take too much of someone's time passing on what may appear to be frivolous piece of information. Be sensible then. If you have your contact's email address, a short email – make it look as though you have done it quickly – is a good way to be non-intrusive. A quick message on voice-mail can achieve the same result – but don't ask them to phone you back. The idea is to provide proactively a piece of information that may be of interest to them not to engage in a discussion about it unless they would wish to do so (in which case they would give you a call).

One critical aspect in all of this is cultivating a relationship with your contact's PA if he/she has one. The PA can be your very greatest ally if you treat them with the significant respect they deserve, are friendly and you can add some value to them. If you are phoning your prospect have a little chat with the PA, ask him/her what kind of day they are having, empathise but don't waste their time. Listen to the voice tones to get a feel as to whether they are busy or simply don't want to converse with you. Not everyone wants to talk about the weather and where they are going for their holidays! Don't treat them as a 'gate keeper' to be got around through trickery or bluff.

Most importantly, when the PA has done something to help you, thank them properly. Send a quick email, but don't, whatever you do, go over the top unless their actions really warrant it. A bunch of flowers arriving on the desk may send several messages which can range from:

- "Well, that's nice".
- "How embarrassing, My boss will think I'm giving you preferable treatment".
- "If he thinks he can get round me by sending flowers, he's got another thing coming".
- "Fantastic, he's in love with me!"

So beware of the inappropriate gift! Be friendly and professional at all times but don't overstep the mark - unless you mean to.

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