

Networking and Informational Interviews

You often hear, “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know!” There is a real element of truth to this but to be accurate, it’s who you know and what you do about it that matters. Networking, or “schmoozing” is simply an *exchange* of information and resources; it’s a two-way street.

People often associate networking with other fields — with high tech or business — not the arts. But networking is an important factor in all fields, especially in the “small world” of music where reputations and connections are critical, if not crucial to career building.

Networking is nothing to be afraid of — it basically means being open and friendly to potential new professional contacts, mentors, employers, and friends. It means getting out and meeting these people at concerts, conferences, and association meetings.

Here are networking guidelines:

Be a good colleague: Don’t overlook the “give and take” of networking. If you share useful information and leads with others, they will likely return the favor. Keep a rolodex, a file, or a computer database of your contacts, with address, phone, fax, e-mail. Exchange business cards with new contacts and build your list — a jazz club owner, a booking agent, a concert series manager, record company representative. Keep in touch with these people, send them concert announcements, send them articles they might be interested in, send them congratulations and thank you notes when appropriate — and they’ll be that much more likely to think of you when they hear of an appropriate opening or opportunity.

Listen well to what other people are saying — about other players, about the business, what contractors and conductors are looking for in players, what they value. Find players who are doing what you want to be doing – get to know them and hang out with them, because if they know your name, they’ll be more likely to refer work your way. You need to network in such a way that people *enjoy* having you on the gig because the truth is there will always be another player willing and ready to take your place.

Give more than you get: Give by sending thank-you’s, passing along articles on topics that would interest your contact, or by referring business or work to your contact.

Get to know people for who they are, not just their positions: Get to know your contacts’ interests outside of work matters. People love to talk about themselves, to give their opinions, so practice striking up conversations that are totally unrelated to the music industry, such as a new film, book, or a local hero.

Follow up on the advice / leads you receive: Even if you don’t think it will pan out, if someone refers you to another contact, make the call. You never know when an unlikely contact may turn into an excellent opportunity. The music world is quite small, so if someone went to the trouble of giving you referrals, they may speak to that person and find out you did not follow up. Make the right impression.

Report back to those who give you a lead: Send thank you cards. No one can ever hear thank you enough.

Ask for exactly what you need: Once you’ve made a new contact that you’d like to ask for information, be clear and concise; if you are looking for suggestions for promoting a self-produced CD, say so.

Keep your word: If you say you’ll send information or press materials by a certain date, do it. It’s your reputation on parade.

Use networking as a part of your job search strategy, not as your whole plan: Make sure you are also reading job listing publications, newspapers — both articles and advertisements, and attending any related conferences, meetings, etc.

Make networking a habit: get in the habit of regularly checking in with the people that you’ve met, send congratulations notes, holiday cards, etc. to keep in touch.

Personal appearance counts: First impressions are lasting impressions. Be clean and neat; be moderate with cologne or aftershave; maintain a businesslike posture and demeanor; remember you want to be seen and treated as a professional. It can be difficult to see yourself objectively — get a reality check, ask for feedback on your appearance from a colleague whose business sense you trust.

Informational Interviewing

An informational interview is a structured way to network: it's an appointment you set up with a professional contact for the purpose of gaining information about the industry and increasing your contacts. It is *not* to ask for a job or a job lead. But having made this personal contact may lead to a professional opportunity, a job, an audition, performance, etc. So it can be very worthwhile to invest your time in doing informational interviews.

Informational interviews are especially helpful to those just leaving school, changing or contemplating a change of careers, and those moving to a new city or town. The informational interview is a tool to establish and expand your professional network so that you know the "right" people — the ones who might refer a gig to you, offer you a job, or listen to and review your demo tape.

It's easiest to start with the people you know: extended family, friends, current and former teachers, and colleagues. You may talk to these people often but just have never had a real conversation about concrete ideas for advancing your music career. Make an appointment: this can be quite casual, a date for coffee or lunch. You need to think what you want to ask. You may want feedback on your promotional materials, or you may want to bounce specific career off people.

At the very least the appointment should yield two or three names of *new* contacts. Ask to use your initial contact's name in calling the new contact. You'll want to be able to say, for example, "Robert Freeman suggested I contact you . . ." Once you have the referral, your initial contact may be by phone or letter. Ask for a brief appointment of 15-20 minutes in order to ask questions and gather information about your area of interest.

If your contact is very busy and has a high-visibility job, you may want to make the initial contact by letter.

Tips on writing an informational interview request letter:

- Produce the letter on good quality paper with your professional letterhead on top.
- Proofread!
- Make absolutely sure you have the exact name, title, address of your new contact — and check the spelling.
- Type or word-process the mailing address and return address on the envelope (don't hand write).
- Research your contact's institution, read their brochure or newsletter; prepare intelligent questions to tap the specific experience & knowledge of the person you're going to interview.
- You may or may not send along your résumé for feedback or general reference — if you include it, just make it clear that you are not asking for a job.

On the next page is a sample request letter for an informational interview.

This is sample letter requesting an informational interview, shown with an explanation of the format.
Each paragraph accomplishes a specific purpose, as explained in the sentences in bold below.

Here is a possible format — adapt it to suit the needs of your situation:

Your letterhead and address on top

Date

Name

Title

Address

City, State, Zip

Dear Mr./Ms. Doe:

The first paragraph should establish a connection to the reader through naming your mutual contact, and should establish why you are writing—to set up a brief meeting in order to gain information.

[Insert contact name and affiliation here, i.e., “Robert Freeman at New England Conservatory”] suggested I contact you for advice and information regarding my current job search in the area of [jazz/orchestral/chamber music/opera performance, arts administration, recording industry, music education, etc.] I am particularly interested in [name your specific skills and interests pertinent to the contact’s area of expertise, i.e., performing contemporary music, early music, teaching grades 6-8, etc.]. I would like to arrange a brief informational interview meeting at your convenience to gain from your knowledge and experience in the field.

The second paragraph should establish your credentials: highlight your most impressive, relevant experience and skills, so that the reader will think it worthwhile to spend time speaking with you. As my résumé indicates, I have extensive [arts administration, teaching, performing] experience. I have [performed in the ABC Symphony/taught at XYZ School from 1995 to 1997]. Most recently, I have been working [as a freelancer in the Denver area/teaching at the New England Conservatory Extension Division].

The third paragraph should reassure the reader that you are not looking for a job, just feedback, that you will call next week and that you appreciate their help — be enthusiastic. I will call next week to arrange a brief meeting at your convenience to talk to you about my job search and I would appreciate any advice you have to offer. I look forward to speaking with you!

Sincerely,

Sign your name

Type your name












After sending the letter, follow up a week later with a phone call. This page details how to have excellent phone technique.






- If your call is screened by a receptionist you can say truthfully, “Ms. X is expecting my call, it’s concerning an appointment” because you wrote that you would call in your letter. *Always be polite and friendly to any receptionist — they can either help you or hurt you.*
- If you get voicemail, leave a concise message, speak clearly, identify yourself and state your purpose for the call. Make sure you leave your number and say it slowly: “Hello this is Jane Doe, I wrote to you last week requesting an informational interview and am calling to follow up. I will try you again but I’ll give you my number: (617) 555-1212. I look forward to speaking with you.”
- When you *do* reach the person you called, say, “Hello, I’m So and So; I wrote to you last week about an informational interview to get some insights from you about the [recording industry, or whatever]. I’d really appreciate 15-20 minutes of your time. Do you think we might be able to meet in the next two weeks?” Once you’ve got your appointment you need to prepare so that you make the most of those 15-20 minutes.

Your phone technique is part of your professional image. It shows off your communications skills. We often have first contacts with professionals by phone. They form an impression of us based on our phone skills. Make sure you are putting your best foot forward.

Phone Technique: be a Pro

Check your good phone habits — how many of these describe you?

-  Your answering machine message should sound professional. What seems fun and cool to your friends can sound embarrassing in a business context. If you use your home number for any professional contacts, the message is part of your professional image. If you have a demo tape of your music that sounds good over your answering machine, that can be fine, but make sure it’s not too loud for your voice-over.
-  Roommates: get a voicemail system with separate boxes for each roommate so that you don’t have to worry about missed messages. Make sure you and your roommates agree to answer the phone for each other in a courteous manner.
-  Messages you leave: Repeat your name and phone number slowly and clearly. Even if you are the one returning a call, leave your phone number anyway, it makes it easier for the other person.
-  Leave concise messages. Identify yourself, say briefly why you are calling. Leave your number and the day and time of your call. Let people you call know when you will be available for their return call — explain if you’ll be out of town or hard to reach — or say when you’ll try back.
-  Courtesy goes a long way. Be respectful of the other person’s time, thank them for returning your call, for answering your questions, for giving you other contacts.
-  Even if you are frustrated with playing phone tag, don’t take it out on the receptionist, and don’t be testy in the message you leave. Be persistent but don’t be a pest. Give people a 2 days to a week to respond. They may be on vacation or away on business.
-  In trying to reach people who work in administrative jobs, it’s generally best to avoid calling on Monday or Fridays. Some people find that calling between 10-11 AM, and between 2-4 PM is best to get people when they are most receptive. You can also try returning phone calls about ten minutes before noon and ten minutes before 5 PM. Most people are in their offices at those times.
-  Check your phone speaking voice — call into your answering machine and leave a message in your normal phone voice. Is your volume ok? pitch? articulation? Ask a colleague for honest feedback.
-  Identify yourself on the phone after the salutation. Always say, “Hello, [or Good Afternoon], my name is so-and-so. I’m trying to reach Ms. Smith.”
-  Don’t chew gum, drink, or eat while on the phone. Ever!
-  Don’t keep the TV, radio, or CD on while on the phone.

-  Don't use slang, or "colorful" language in business conversations.
-  Don't work on the computer while you talk to someone — they can always hear it and it's rude.
-  Never accept a phone call when you're in a face-to-face meeting with someone else; it's rude.
-  Never write down a phone number without the person's name.
-  Be sensitive to their time constraints; especially if you are calling someone at home, ask, "Is this a convenient time to talk?" Offer to call back at another time if they sound harried or under pressure.

Once you have your informational interview scheduled, some preparation will help you get the most of your appointment. The next section describes a general format and questions you might want to use. Use this as an suggested outline to think about how you specifically want to use your networking opportunity.

Sample Informational Interview Questions / Format

Be conscious of time. Don't waste your time or theirs; only ask questions that you *really* want to ask.

Introduction: Good morning Ms. Doe. It's a pleasure to meet you. I really appreciate you taking the time to see me and answer some of my questions.

Purpose and expectations: As I mentioned in my letter/over the phone, my purpose in this meeting is not to ask you for a job. At this point in my search, what would be most useful to me is your advice and perspective on the field.

Self-introduction: First of all, I'd like to tell you a bit about my background and experience. [Be able to do this in 2-3 concise sentences — do not go into detail. What to highlight: Briefly mention the skills that you'd like to use in future jobs, if you haven't already.] Based on the skills and experience I have outlined, what should I emphasize in this field?

Résumé Critique: [Ask for this only if necessary. Ask for general comments; don't go into detail. Remember that everyone has different ideas; use your own judgment in taking advice. 1-2 minutes.]

Job Outlook: I'd like to shift the focus a bit and ask your advice about the employment outlook in (music teaching jobs or recording industry positions or performance opportunities in our local area). Where should I look for advertised and unadvertised positions? What other positions should I be looking for?

Other Resources: [Mention some of the things you've been doing in your job search, resources you've used, places you've looked.] Do you have any suggestions of journals/publications in this field or professional organizations where I could meet more people in the field?

Referral: Do you know of individuals who would be willing, like yourself, to provide me with additional information on the field? May I use your name in contacting Ms. Y?

Be Remembered: I would appreciate it if you would keep me in mind when you learn of any appropriate openings in the field.

Follow-up: Do you mind if I give you a call to update you on my job search?

Closing: Thank you for taking the time to see me. Your advice will certainly give my job search a better direction. You've have been very helpful and I appreciate it.

Send a thank you note immediately and then keep in touch!

This a tracking sheet you can use to gather the information you gain from your contacts. It's important to stay in touch with these people — your expanding network — keep a notebook or a computer file for this information.

Make photocopies of this page for your job search notebook
to keep track of the contacts and follow-ups you make.

Your Network Tracking Sheet

Date _____

Name _____ Title _____

Organization _____

Address _____

Referred by: _____

Industry area/subject explored _____

Date thank you sent _____

What did I learn about this contact?

What did I learn about the area of the industry from her/him?

What suggestions did I get?

Referrals given were

Date	Type of contact (phone/meeting/message)	Your follow-up actions
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Beyond one-to-one networking and informational interviews, there are opportunities to network at social functions, after-concert receptions, and at professional conferences. Many people find this type of schmoozing intimidating. Don't worry, below are tricks to help you feel more at ease in these situations and remember, the more you do, the easier it gets.

How to “work a room”

Networking at events: for receptions after concerts, conferences, association meetings, etc.

Once you're at the event, here's what to do:

Observe: Take time when you arrive to look around and get your bearings, check who is there, you may see people you know, where the food and drinks are, etc. Are there other people who came by themselves? You might want to strike up a conversation with one of them. Also look for conversation groups of three or more that you might join later. Don't worry about who to talk with yet, you're just checking out the scene.

Assess: Check in with how you are feeling, what you're thinking. If you're nervous, you may have these kinds of thoughts playing in your head:

“this looks awful”

“I wore the wrong thing”

“no one looks friendly”

“I can't wait to get out of here”

You can change these negative “tapes” and replace them with positive and realistic statements.

Tell yourself:

“These are people I have something in common with, they are musicians and music lovers”

“Other people here feel just as awkward as I do”

“I may feel a little nervous but it doesn't show”

“This is an opportunity to make a new acquaintance”

“Hey, I might have an interesting conversation here”

It is absolutely true that we make our own reality — what we tell ourselves determines how we feel and how we perceive. Do yourself a favor and keep your self-talk positive. If you need a break, you can always go to the restroom to collect your thoughts.

Check your attitude: Be open and friendly, people can sense your mood and your “approachability.”

Look the part: personal appearance counts. Dress appropriately for the situation — you want to be seen as, and treated as a professional.

Smile: This is the way people signal they are approachable, so make sure you are doing it.

Project confidence: if you need to, “fake it till you make it.” Stand tall, and when striking up a conversation, make eye contact, smile, shake hands. You can always look around the room as though you were looking for someone, whether you really are or not. Don't sit — people will not approach you; you need to circulate in the room.

Hold your drink in your left hand; shake with your right: avoid soggy handshakes from holding your drink with your “handshake” hand!

Wear your name tag on your right: This way anyone you meet can easily read your name tag as you shake hands.

Strike up a conversation with others who are alone or looking around. It may be easiest to do in the reception line, registration line, or in a buffet/bar line. Don't assume that you are more ill at ease than your neighbor — you'll probably both welcome a bit of friendly ice-breaking conversation. A pleasant comment about the weather, the food, the line you're in, the room or your surroundings, or about the event you both are attending may lead to an interesting acquaintance. For topics of conversation, play it safe: stay away from politics, religion, sexual innuendo, and colorful language, at least until you know the other person well enough to risk an offense.

Listen: You have 2 ears and 1 mouth, use them in that proportion. Ask open-ended questions, like “What do you think about. . .” as opposed to yes/no questions. Be interested in the *other* person, ask questions that show your interest and understanding of the other person's area of expertise.

Approach only groups of three or more: don't interrupt a twosome — it's likely to be a very personal conversation. Stand on the outside of a group until you are acknowledged or until there is an opening to join in the conversation.

Reintroduce yourself to people you know first: Start with a familiar face. Don't feel embarrassed to reintroduce yourself, especially if you are meeting or joining a group. No one expects you to remember all the names, but if someone is fumbling to remember yours, introduce yourself first and save them the embarrassment.

Exchange Business cards: do this only after you've established a rapport with the other person. It's helpful to write a reminder to yourself on the back of the cards you receive, with where and when you met the person and what kind of follow-up is appropriate.

Be Realistic: Don't expect a job lead or a performance opportunity to materialize after one chance meeting. People usually need to meet several times socially or in conferences/meetings before they will accurately remember names and faces. A first meeting is an opportunity to set up a follow-up meeting, or an informational interview to find out if there's a potential to work together or to be recommended to other people. In a two-hour networking situation you probably should expect to talk to 5-7 people and maybe have 1 or 2 substantive conversations with people (and exchange cards with only those).

Do what you say you will: if you say you'll call or send an article or leave a message for someone, do so. Your promise and your word need to be good. It's the mark of a professional.

Start your networking by first re-connecting with the people you already know, you'll be surprised at how many of the people you already know can help you in your career. Statistics tell us that people "know" between 100 and 1,000 other people — whatever size your network is now it can always be expanded.

Remember "six degrees of separation?" The theory is that anyone you'd like to meet is only six people away from you now. The world is so small that people can connect to anyone through starting with people they know.

Test your Networking Skills

(This quiz is adapted from materials produced by the Jewish Vocational Services, a non-sectarian career center offering counseling, job listings, and workshops in Boston, MA.)

1. Do you look for ways to supply resources and information that can help others fulfill their personal and professional goals? yes no

2. Do you know at least 50 people well enough (professionally or socially) to call and say, "Hi, this is _____," and they will know who you are and what your skills and talents are? yes no

3. Do you belong to at least four professional or community organizations? And are you active in them? yes no

4. At social and business events, are you comfortable with introductions, can you remember names, and do you introduce people to each other? yes no

5. When people ask, "What do you do?" can you explain simply and vividly? yes no

6. In conversation, do you let people know the kinds of problems you can solve and the kinds of work you can supply, so contacts can refer the right kind job leads, or potential customers to you? yes no

7. Do you exchange business cards only after you've discovered a reason to do so? yes no

8. Do you find appropriate ways to say, "Thank you," when someone gives information or a referral? yes no

**Selected Readings for
Networking, People Skills, Listening Skills, & Communication Skills**

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