

## 01/17/2006 - Why We Need to Teach Networking

**Relationship-building courses have yet to become a business school requirement. Isn't it time that changed?**

September 27, 2004

By Ivan Misner

If you're a regular reader of this column, you've learned a lot about networking, word-of-mouth marketing and social capital. However, it might surprise you to learn that as a college professor, I'd tell you that you've actually received a better education on these subjects than what you would have received at most universities or colleges around the world. As hard as that is to believe, it's true.

How do I know this? Well, besides knowing many college professors and having taught in two business schools myself, I've confirmed it by asking thousands of entrepreneurs about the subject.

I recently surveyed more than 1,400 businesspeople, and 88 percent of the respondents said they never had any college course that even covered the topic of networking! I'm not talking about an entire course on the subject (they are almost nonexistent); I'm talking about any course that simply covered the topic in school. Yet, based on another survey of more than 2,500 businesspeople worldwide, 75 percent said they got most of their business through networking!

Networking, which can help you build word-of-mouth marketing, is one of the most important ways for entrepreneurs to grow their businesses, yet we don't teach it in colleges or universities around the world. Despite that fact, according to a third survey of business professionals that I've conducted, 82 percent of all businesspeople belong to some type of networking group!

OK, so let's recap: The overwhelming majority of entrepreneurs from these surveys belong to some type of networking group and get a major portion of their business through networking, yet only a fraction have ever had any course that even mentioned the subject of networking (forget about a full-blown class on the subject). What's wrong with this picture?

We give people bachelor's degrees in marketing, business and even entrepreneurship, but we teach them hardly anything about the one subject that virtually every entrepreneur says is critically important to their business—networking and social capital.

I currently teach at a university in Southern California. For more than 15 years, I've been unable to get the business school to even consider a course on this subject. (Ironically, the school of psychology is willing to have me teach it, but not the school of business.)

Why don't business schools teach this subject? I think it's because most business schools are made up of professors who've never owned a business in their life. Almost everything they've learned about running a business they've learned from books and consulting. Well, I've read a fair number of books, I was a consultant for many years, and I've run my own business for more than two decades. I can tell you firsthand that if you haven't actually owned a business, you have a handicap in teaching a course involving entrepreneurship.

Can you imagine a law course taught by someone who's not an attorney, or an accounting course taught by anyone without direct accounting experience? Yet we put business professors in colleges to teach courses related to marketing and entrepreneurship with little or no firsthand experience in the field. Is it any wonder then that a subject that's so critically important to businesspeople would be so completely missed by business schools? Of course not. Networking and social capital courses aren't taught in business schools because most business professors aren't practitioners. They don't really understand the importance of this subject for entrepreneurs.

Granted, there was little written in the field of networking and social capital 20 years ago (do a

literature search—you'll see), but that's not the case today. There are hundreds of articles and many books on various facets of the area. A thorough bibliography of many of these articles and books can be found in the back of the revised edition of [\*The World's Best Known Marketing Secret\*](#) (Bard Press). Networking is a field that's finally being codified and structured.

Business schools worldwide need to wake up and start teaching this curriculum. Schools, like any large institution, are bureaucracies, so it's unlikely to happen quickly; however, for those schools with vision, foresight and the ability to act swiftly (sort of the way business professors claim that "businesses" should act), they'll be positioning themselves as leaders in education by truly understanding and responding to the needs of today's businesses. These schools will be on the cutting edge of business education so as to better serve their students while positioning themselves as a leading institution for entrepreneurs.

Word-of-mouth marketing works. Social capital is critically important. And networking is the mechanism to develop both. As more universities and colleges open their doors to professors who want to include this strategy with their marketing instruction, we're going to see a major shift in the business landscape. We'll see emerging entrepreneurs who will be equipped with another strategy for success in business. We'll see networking utilized at its fullest capacity, and we'll see business schools actually teaching a subject that the business practitioner says is important.

What a thought. Oh well, it's good to have goals.

By the way, there is at least one school that has a regular, core-curriculum, college course on the subject of networking and social capital: the University of Michigan. Wayne Baker, co-owner of Humax Corp. in Ann Arbor, Michigan, teaches the course. Well done, Wayne.

On a final note, if you think a course on this subject is a good idea, e-mail this article to the department chair of any business school you may know. If I'm lucky, the school where I teach may finally be interested—or if I'm not, I may need to find another teaching position.

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