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you really want to do, whether it's switching careers, adopting a baby or finding a new home or even a husband. "A network of women is faster at problem-solving than a computer," says Ronna Lichtenberg, author of *Pitch Like a Girl: How a Woman Can Be Herself and Still Succeed*. "It can help make your dream better and give you ways to get started realizing it."

give and take

Remember the last time a friend told you about a great restaurant? Or maybe you recommended a babysitter, a doctor, a must-read book or a movie? Anytime you or someone you know offers information, a suggestion or an idea about something of value or interest to you, that's networking. It's a mutually beneficial way to share information, resources and access to things you both need and want.

Networking often creates opportunities to broaden your horizons by meeting new people, making new friends and creating and growing strong relationships. It can also be a support system that provides help, advice and friendship. "Most people go through life not realizing there's an abundance of resources, ideas and people out there to help you," says Lynne Waymon, coauthor with Anne Baber of *Make Your Contacts Count*. "Whatever you want to do, you can use networking to get there."

Effective relationship-building is always a two-way street—one that begins with giving and results in receiving. "The best relationships start when I reach out to someone who I have a good feeling about," says Lichtenberg. "I'm really curious about what I can do to support her dream. When I do, her immediate response is, 'Tell me about you.' As women we like an equal energy exchange. It feels good to help people."

So think of networking as money in the bank. "The more help and goodwill you deposit, the more withdrawals you can make by way of information, influence,

commodities and support," says Robbie Miller Kaplan, author of *How to Say It When You Don't Know What to Say*. "Keep an ear to the needs of friends, family, coworkers and others in your community. Help to fulfill their needs by way of referrals and information. Strengthen relationships by sharing information of interest and sending short thinking-of-you and congratulations messages."

know what you need

The first step is to be clear about what you really want. People have to know what your dreams are in order to help you. For example, if your dream is to work in the health care field, don't just say, "I'm looking for a job," says Baber. "Instead, if there is a medical center in your area that you want to investigate, ask your contact if she knows anyone who works there whom you might talk to for advice and information. If she does, ask if you might use her name when you make contact or, even better, if she'll call to introduce you."

When you are specific about what you need, you'll feel so much more of a sense of control, Baber adds. "It's a very practical way to approach it."

Susan Pepperdine got specific and made her dreams come true when she applied some of the strategies she uses in her public relations and marketing work to dating. "I came up with a three-step method: Put your best self forward, go to everything, and stand next to someone," says Susan, 57, who lives in Fairway, Kansas. "My dream came



Susan Pepperdine



Mary Jackson Clark



Katie McCracken



Amy Otey



Melissa Lewis

I dream of being a successful television scriptwriter. *Katie Doolan, Homewood, IL*

generate my own designs." Now, she uses networking to build her business by keeping in touch with fellow students, teachers and members of the Association of Professional Landscape Designers.

making contact

To grow your own network or join an existing one, set a few simple goals. "For example, if you're looking for work online, make it a goal to join some professional groups so you get out and meet people twice a week," says Lichtenberg. "If you're working, join at least one group and volunteer to be on a committee."

When Amy Otey, 42, who lives in Ewing, New Jersey, left her job in a continuing care retirement community to care for her son, who was born prematurely, she felt isolated. To find other moms to connect with, she drove around her neighborhood. "I saw a woman unloading a stroller from her car and asked if she was a stay-at-home mom. When she said yes, my life changed forever."

A network of friends was born, and it grew into a group of 22 families who gather to play, walk, visit and support each other. "We call each other for advice about everything from doctors to independent contractors." Recently Amy used networking to submit her children's CD, *Underwater*, for a Grammy.

Melissa Lewis, 42, a professional speaker and coach, tapped into an existing network to move from Washington, DC, to Kansas City, Missouri. Since she had no connections in the area, she e-mailed the president of the local chapter of the National Speakers Association in Kansas City and asked for recommendations on finding an apartment, and so on. "I was flooded with wonderful advice, referrals and lunch offers that helped me get acquainted with the area and make friends," she says. "Thanks to networking, I'm now married and happily settled in my new home."

As you go through life, your network grows with you. "Remember, every meeting can become an opportunity if you think about what resources and ideas you're looking for and if you are willing to offer contacts that may be useful to others," says Baber. "When you share your enthusiasm and goals and are genuinely interested in others, you are networking. Life is a networking event." **WD**

10 ways to fit networking into your busy life

Think you don't have time to network? Think again.

- 1 Do you exercise? Invite someone to walk with you or enjoy a guest pass for a day at your fitness center.
- 2 Get a twofor. Instead of inviting only one person to lunch, ask two people who might like to know each other.
- 3 Start going to business get-togethers. Do you belong to an organization but rarely get to its monthly meeting? Put the meeting on your calendar today, so the time is blocked off. Make a note on your calendar to remind you to make a reservation if you need one.
- 4 Are you driving to a meeting? Ask a contact if she'd like a ride. That will give you time together to talk.
- 5 Try piggybacking. Plan to have coffee with a contact after a meeting or ask another family out for pizza after a soccer game.
- 6 Sit with people you don't know well. Before going to meetings and activities, call an acquaintance and say, "Let's sit together. I'd like to get to know you better."
- 7 Keep an eye out for useful info. Read the newspaper or your favorite magazine with a few people in mind. If you see something that would be interesting or useful to them, clip it and mail it with a short note.
- 8 Make it a habit. Are there friends or business contacts you just don't see often enough? Set up a once-a-month get-together at a nearby coffeehouse or restaurant.
- 9 Do you volunteer? Ask a contact if she'd like to join you to make lasagna and deliver it to the Ronald McDonald House.
- 10 Always have business cards. That way you can give new contacts your cell-phone number and e-mail address.

Source: Anne Baber and Lynne Waymon, *Make Your Contacts Count: Networking Know-How for Cash, Clients, and Career Success*

web

Dare to Dream! Want help achieving your dream? Share Your Dreams with Woman's Day. Join our Dare to Dream Club online. Post what you want to achieve and get advice from other members on the steps you need to take. For more information, go to www.womansday.com/dreams.

NEXTISSUE Go back to school to advance your dreams.

My dream is to have a real honeymoon with my husband. Jennifer Bouzgard, Denham Springs, LA