

Networking in the Community & Establishing a Holistic Health Practice

By Ryan N. Harrison, MA

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Introduction & Networking

There are actually two components to this teleconference, and though they can certainly be related, I'm going to talk about each of them separately: Networking (with particular emphasis to networking in the community) and Establishing a Practice.

So let's start with Networking. What is it? What does the term "networking" mean? In the context in which we're using it, networking can have several similar definitions:

1. A system of lines or channels that cross or interconnect.
2. A complex, interconnected group or system.
3. An extended group of people with similar interests or concerns who interact and remain in contact for mutual assistance and support.

I'd like to propose a working definition for our purposes here, and that would be:

Networking: A system through which a group of people or businesses with similar interests interconnect for mutual assistance, support, and professional and business development.

What this really means is that networking is about establishing personal connections and exchanging information with people who have similar ideals, businesses, etc. This is very different from a hierarchy, which has people at the bottom and people at the top...who may rarely even meet or know each other. Networking is more like a web, each person connecting to the others in a way that makes the network strong and wide.

It's not uncommon for people to think that networking is like a bad word. It can conjure images of uncomfortable situations between family members and friends. Some think it relates directly to the fierce, dog-eat-dog world of business. But it doesn't have to be that way. An interesting and informative read on the subject is a book titled *It's Who You Know: Career Strategies for Making Effective Personal Contacts* by Cynthia Chin-Lee. She points out, for example, that 68% of all jobs are found through personal contacts, whereas only 15% are found through agencies, 9% through advertisements and 8% through other means. Obviously, it can be really important for our students to make some good connections in their communities. So, how do they do this?

Recognize Who You Are & Choose Again

Ms. Chin-Lee suggests that there are actually three kinds of people:

1. People who makes things happen
2. People who watch things happen
3. People who get knocked over the head and then wonder “what happened?”

Obviously, to be a successful networker, you’re going to need to be the first kind person in that list. That may mean having to change your script, your “act” in life. Unlike other changes that usually need to be made for our own well-being, this isn’t a particularly hard thing to do, as long as you’re focused and you are clear on what you’re doing, what you’re after, and why.

There are six components that go into successful networking. These include:

1. **Openness and flexibility** – You should be open to new possibilities, new options, new opportunities as they arise. At the same time, be flexible enough that you can change gears as necessary in order to accommodate possibilities and opportunities that come up.
2. **Goal orientation** – Know what you’re after and what the network is after but be flexible in your approach to accomplishing the goal.
3. **Self-disclosure** – To get the most out of networking, you need to be able to talk to anyone. Specifically, you need to be able to tell people who you are, what you’re doing, what you’ve done, and what you want or need.
4. **Altruism and Empowerment** – Networking is about helping others and asking others for help. When you ask others for help, it empowers them. Likewise, when they ask you for help, you are empowered.
5. **Gratitude** – The cardinal sin of networking is forgetting to recognize the networking help you’ve received. Thanking others for their help is essential and will strengthen the network.
6. **Persistence** – In this case, persistence doesn’t necessary mean hounding someone for something (though there is a place for that, I suppose, from time to time). Rather, this means not slacking off, not letting something slide by that can help you or someone else in your network. For example, you hear about a job opening that someone in your network would be great for...contact her! Don’t just let it slide. Putting energy into the network will result in more energy to draw from later.

Being a Network Weaver

As with most things, to build a successful network, you need to start where you are. And where you are when you start a network is right in the middle of things. A person who steps into the active leading role of gathering people together in a network can be called a *Network Weaver*.

A network weaver is someone who can bring together several small clusters of people or individuals under one unified umbrella. This person has the vision, the energy, and the social skills to connect to diverse individuals and groups and start information flowing to and from and between them. This is a critical phase for community building because everything depends on a weaver who is the hub in the network.

Initially a network weaver forms relationships with individuals or small clusters of people who are already networked together (such as owners and employees at a day spa). During this phase a

weaver is learning about each individual or small clusters – discovering what they know and what they need. However, this first step (which we can call the hub-and-spoke model) is only a temporary step in building the network. It should not be utilized for long because it concentrates both power and vulnerability in one person – the Weaver, the center, the one acting as the hub. If the weaver fails or leaves then the hub-and-spoke network falls apart.

In healthy networks, the spokes of the hub do not remain separated for long. The weaver begins connecting those individuals and clusters who can collaborate or assist one another in some way. At the same time, the weaver also begins encouraging others to begin weaving the network as well. The result is that the hub becomes less defined, and the lines drawn between people become multiplied and easily tapped.

It's important to recognize that the goal here is not to own, rule, or govern a network of people, but to develop a strong network of people who know and respect each other and want to help and support each other, as well. This isn't about power or position. It's about connecting people in order to increase possibility. A well-connected network will actually thrive on its own and won't need you (the Weaver) once things get rolling.

In the beginning, there may need to be a fair amount of overseeing done, simply so connections between people that are established don't fall away into nothingness. A Network Weaver's job is really two-fold:

1. Build relationships (particularly across established divides, if possible)
2. Facilitate collaborations between parties.

For example, as a Network Weaver you build relationship with Person A and Person B. Your next step is to help them successfully collaborate on something together, so that their relationship grows stronger without your having to support it.

Building a Network

So, how do you actually build a network? How do you get into the situation where you're pulling people and ideas together, building a catch-all net that everyone can draw from? While I'm no expert and don't have anything resembling formal education where networking is concerned, I've taken some ideas and divided them into two groups: Basic Networking, and Advanced Networking.

Basic networking is the "easy" stuff. It pretty much asks that you put yourself out there (again, referring to #3 above – Self Disclosure).

Advanced networking takes a little more effort and work. These are the things you do when you are really confident in yourself, in your business, and in your ability to weave together a strong and wide network.

So, some basic networking ideas include:

1. **Networking with Alumni.** GCNM students are in a particularly good situation, because they can network among themselves in an active online environment that spans the country (and in some cases, the world). In addition, they have a built-in captive audience that already shares their natural-health passion. All they need to do is spend a little time connecting with others as well as putting their own selves and needs out there. One great place for this is the Alumni Forum, where I've started what I've been calling an eRolodex. Essentially, graduates can enter their contact information, their credentials, specialties in the world of holistic health and even their affiliate and distributor information, if they are so connected to other companies. This eRolodex has been up for several weeks and yet mine is still the only entry! I think graduates should be directly encouraged (perhaps as part of the graduation packet that goes out with the certificates) to at the very least, post their contact information. Even if it changes (and it probably will), they can always come back and modify their information.
2. **Network with Friends, Family, and Co-workers.** People have different family, social and career situations, so this really needs to be advice given and taken on a case-by-case basis. Still, most people have family and friends that want them to succeed. Even if they don't necessarily share the same vision, family and friends can give support to GCNM graduates by being open about what that graduate has studied and is doing. My own mother, for example, in typical American fashion, is not holistically-minded. Yet, she will tell people that I have studied nutrition, that I teach it, and that I have a practice through which I help people come to better health naturally. It's in my best interest to consider her part of my network and as such, to be sure that I keep in contact, keep her up to date on what I'm doing, and find out if I can help her in any way. An extra step would be to connect her with someone else in my "network" so that she gets even further "plugged in" to a system that exists to support people.

Networking with co-workers can be a bit more difficult, and requires some finesse and a healthy dose of respect. Few people are natural-born salespeople, and most people don't like being on the receiving end of a sales pitch. Networking doesn't have to be a sales pitch, and in fact, the strongest networks are probably not built around products and sales. When establishing networks with co-workers, you'll want to be sure that the person you approach shares your common interest. (Remember a network is a collection of people with similar interests and ideals. You don't try to build a holistic health network with people that are staunchly opposed to natural health, for example.) So, assuming a person doesn't work in a health food store, day spa, wellness center, etc. probably the best way to invite people into the network will be to (once again) practice some self-disclosure: let others know what your interests are, why you do what you do, etc. Those that are ready will be drawn to you, and then you can start weaving them into the network by connecting them with others and fostering that relationship.

3. **Attending Professional Meetings, Conferences, Seminars, etc.** One of the easiest ways to network is to go to workshops and conferences that are directly related to your interests. These offer prime opportunities to get to know other people who are probably already networked somewhere else. Have business cards ready and a personal website set up, so that the people you meet can learn more about you and contact you directly. Pay

attention to what each person is doing, desiring, what direction their going, etc., and you'll have a better chance of connecting people who would be mutually beneficial with each other. In the beginning, where these professional workshops are concerned, it's probably better to consider staying closer to home, rather than traveling far and wide, simply because people that are closer geographically are more likely to continue communicating and working with you than those you may never meet again.

- 4. Join Professional Organizations.** It's not hard to find holistic health organizations that are interested new members. Quite a few of them are national in scope and are available online. Members of these organizations can have their names and practice information listed in print and online giving them an opportunity to introduce themselves to a wider audience. Gifted network weavers will reach out to those in leadership positions within such organizations or aspire to leadership positions themselves. Drawing into the network people in these positions can be a really effective way to strengthen and widen a network.

A few advanced networking techniques might include:

- 1. Giving Presentations, Workshops, Seminars, etc.** While this usually requires a good amount of time and energy (and sometimes money) it's one of the best ways that you can draw people to you that have similar interests and connections to others with similar interests. Any GCNM graduate should be able to put together a presentation or workshop on the subject of their training. An NC graduate, for example, could easily put together a workshop on healthy weight loss, organic foods, or just simply "how to eat healthy". An MH graduate could offer a presentation on herbs for detoxification, or for pregnancy or for everyday use. And an HHP graduate could do any of these things, or more! Putting these kinds of activities together and offering them to the community brings people to you who are interested in what you do. And chances are, they know other people who do (or are interested in) similar things. The key in this technique is to develop relationships with participants, keep excellent record of their contact and personal information, and invite them to connect with you and share your information with others. Then, when this starts to happen, it's important to nurture relationships that arise. If Person A, for example, is a holistic dentist and Person Z is a massage therapist with a killer toothache, you are in a great position to connect the two! You don't lose anything by connecting others. Rather, your network grows, because people come to recognize that you are trying to help people...and they will, in turn, think of how they can help you.
- 2. Publishing Articles.** Holistic Health consultants should consider writing and publishing articles in their communities, or in organization newsletters, magazines, and journals. A way to go about this is to obtain several publications that are seen by your target audience and determine which one is most likely to publish a paper that you might offer them. Contact the editor and find out whether they are looking for papers and what topics are particularly interesting at the moment. Find out the approximate length of paper they are looking for. You'll probably find that publishing a paper is less taxing than giving a presentation, but also less gratifying and less effective in drawing people into your network. One of the issues with this technique is that you only get to tell your story,

rather than having an opportunity to exchange ideas and information with others. Still, your ideas and reputation will reach more people, and with a good byline including your contact information, this is great way to let other people know how to contact you. Both publishing and presenting will fortify your networking.

3. **Build/Maintain a Professional Website & Join a WebRing.** A web presence is easy to afford for most people. Building an interesting and informative website, on the other hand, takes a lot of effort and time, especially if you're doing it yourself. There are professionals out there who can put together a nice webpage for you, if you provide enough information and direction, but this usually costs a fair amount. Personally, I think it's worth it. Once you have a website up, however, you can publish your own articles and have a page specifically devoted to contacts or other holistic health practitioners. Ask those for whom you are providing a link to link back to your webpage as well. Once you have a website up and operational, it is also a good idea to join a "webring," which is a collection of websites on the internet that are joined together, allowing visitors to visit other sites "in the ring." You never know who might just find your website and what they will have to add to your network!
4. **Create a Newsletter, Magazine, Newspaper, Catalog, etc.** If there aren't any opportunities for you to publish where you live or to connect with others of like mind, consider starting your own publication. It will take some time and effort to produce, but you'll have a great tool for "spreading the word" about your interests, education, skills, and practice. Interested people will contact you and you can draw them into the network by discovering their interests, education, skills and talents and then helping them plug in where they can be of service. If you live in an area where there are other holistic health consultants or practitioners, consider putting together a brochure or catalog that acts like a guide to the holistic health options available in your community. Putting it together will require some hard work and a lot of communication with other practitioners, but this is exactly what helps a network grow! The footwork required in putting this kind of holistic health practitioner catalog together will make just about anyone a Network Weaver! Other practitioners can help contribute to the catalog (financially as well as with information, advertisements, short articles, etc.), and this could come out periodically (perhaps freely distributed at health food stores, day spas, wellness centers, practitioner offices, etc.).

Networking is a skill and it can be used skillfully to accomplish just about anything. Networking is more than just shaking hands and passing out business cards. It's about cultivating relationships with other professionals. It's about realizing the resources that come from building social relationships. It's all about people helping people helping people.

To conclude this part of the presentation, let me share with you a list of 10 Tips on Networking that comes from Entrapreneur.com. The following traits were ranked in order of their perceived importance to networking. These are traits that will make you what they call a "master networker."

1. Follows up on referrals. This was ranked as the No. 1 trait of successful networkers. If you present an opportunity, whether it's a simple piece of information, a special contact or a qualified business referral, to someone who consistently fails to follow up successfully, it's no secret that you'll eventually stop wasting your time with this person.

2. Positive attitude. A consistently negative attitude makes people dislike being around you and drives away referrals; a positive attitude makes people want to associate and cooperate with you. Positive business professionals are like magnets. Others want to be around them and will send their friends, family and associates to them.

3. Enthusiastic/motivated. Think about the people you know. Who gets the most referrals? People who show the most motivation, right? It's been said that the best sales characteristic is enthusiasm. To be respected within our networks, we at least need to sell ourselves with enthusiasm. Once we've done an effective job of selling ourselves, we'll be able to reap the reward of seeing our contacts sell us to others! That's motivation in and of itself!

4. Trustworthy. When you refer one person to another, you're putting your reputation on the line. You have to be able to trust your referral partner and be trusted in return. Neither you nor anyone else will refer a contact or valuable information to someone who can't be trusted to handle it well.

5. Good listening skills. Our success as networkers depends on how well we can listen and learn. The faster you and your networking partners learn what you need to know about each other, the faster you'll establish a valuable relationship. Communicate well, and listen well.

6. Networks always. Master networkers are never off duty. Networking is so natural to them that they can be found networking in the grocery store line, at the doctor's office and while picking the kids up from school, as well as at the chamber mixers and networking meetings.

7. Thanks people. Gratitude is sorely lacking in today's business world. Expressing gratitude to business associates and clients is just another building block in the cultivation of relationships that will lead to increased referrals. People like to refer others to business professionals that go above and beyond. Thanking others at every opportunity will help you stand out from the crowd.

8. Enjoys helping. Helping others can be done in a variety of ways, from literally showing up to help with an office move to clipping a helpful and interesting article and mailing it to an associate or client. Master networkers keep their eyes and ears open for opportunities to advance *other* people's interests whenever they can.

9. Sincere. Insincerity is like a cake without frosting! You can offer the help, the thanks, the listening ear, but if you aren't sincerely interested in the other person, they'll know it! Those who have developed successful networking skills convey their sincerity at every turn. One of the best ways to develop this trait is to give the individual with whom you're developing a referral relationship your undivided attention.

10. Works their network. It's not net-sit or net-eat, it's net-work, and master networkers don't let any opportunity to work their networks pass them by. They manage their contacts with contact management software, organize their e-mail address files and carry their referral partners' business cards as well as their own. They set up appointments to get better acquainted with new contacts so that they can learn as much about them as possible so that they can truly become part of each other's networks.

There's a trend within these 10 points and that is they all tie in to long-term relationship building, not to one shot wonders. People who take the time to build their relationships are the ones who will have new business referred to them over and over. And part of that building of relationships is referring people to others in the network! It's a cycle. As I said earlier: It's all about people helping people helping people.

Now let's talk about how to build a practice.

Building a Practice

There are many different ways to go about starting a practice, from "trying something out" and spreading it around friends, to spending lots of money up front, renting a space and investing in product, advertisement and employees. For our purposes here, we'll discuss how to set up a home-based practice. This will give us a general understanding of some good ideas and things to keep in mind which can be applied to other ventures (such as joining a wellness center, etc.).

Keep it Legal

One of the first steps involved is to get a business license. This can be done relatively easily through the city administration. You would want to contact City Hall and ask for the Business License Division. My experience is that all you have to do is fill out a form and pay them for processing (rates will vary...mine was \$60 initially). This license should be framed and kept visible somewhere in your office.

Prepare Your Office

If you are going to have a home office, it is important (both for tax purposes and professionalism) that you have a room devoted only to this purpose. There should not be a bed or television in the office (unless the television is used in practice, as a teaching tool, for example). Keeping an office for that specific use makes the space tax deductible, allowing you to claim a portion of your utilities and rent (or mortgage) as business expenses.

Otherwise, try to look at the space as your clients will. Do you have enough sitting space? Will you need a massage table (for energy work), or any other physical items? What books are in your bookcase? Do you have a desk and if so, what is on it? Will you need a computer, printer, fax machine, copier, etc.? Some other items to consider include:

- Filing cabinet with a lock
- Files to be used for individual clients
- Case study, Disclaimer, and other forms to have clients fill out
- Water dispenser
- Throw pillows (many people like to hold them)

- Posters or pictures that are educational or soothing?
- Receipt book

If you are going to retail supplements and other holistic health items, you'll need a Seller's Permit (sometimes called a Retail License). You get this through the Board of Equalization. You'll also need a place to store these items and I suggest it be simultaneously cool and dark, to protect the integrity of the supplements while allowing your clients to see them.

Advertising

Once you have your office space set up and you are ready to start seeing clients, you'll want to advertise your practice. Advertising can take many forms and much of it depends on your ingenuity. Here are some ideas:

- Business cards
- Business post cards
- Custom-printed clothing
- Automobile decals
- Brochures/Flyers
- Promotional items (be sure they have your logo/name on them!)
- Newsletters (electronic or print)

Locating holistically-friendly establishments and leaving business cards, brochures, coupons, etc. with them is a great way to get to know other practitioners and natural-health resources as well as to advertise your services to a wider audience.

It's also good to be online. People expect businesses to have an online presence. Your website address will be something you definitely want to have on the business card and other advertising materials. Additionally, having eNewsletters allows people to pass them around via e-mail; the potential target audience then becomes unlimited!

Actively Recruiting

Another way to give your practice a boost is to be proactive and give presentations and workshops that speak specifically to what you do and know. Local churches are great for this kind of thing, especially if you attend one! Offer a short workshop on natural health or nutrition or herbal remedies and tell friends and family to bring others along. If you can, try to get your workshop advertised in the church's Sunday bulletin/program. (You need to be careful to not sell anything during the workshop or on the premises, however, as the church can lose its non-profit standing.)

This same approach would work well for community centers and day spas or wellness centers. Other holistic health institutions should be happy to have you do this, because it brings people right into their space, where they can have free advertisement of their own services and goods. Just be sure that you always have enough of your own business cards and brochures to give out.

That concludes my presentation.

References

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