

## JOHN SUNTIMO'S 10 LAWS OF EFFECTIVE NETWORKING:

This is the story of John Suntimo. John was a member of the TMO Class of 2002. He was trying to get away from his background as a scientist and into the fast-paced wonder of the business world. Unfortunately, John was still a technical guy in a bearish economy so his prospects weren't particularly good. Few of the on-campus corporations were interested in his "techy" resume and his unusual background made him a little bit too risky in these tight times. Besides, John didn't really want a job at a mega-corp; he was more comfortable in a smaller firm. So John knew there was only one way to land his dream job...networking.

John also knew that networking sucks. Working professionals treat a call from a student the way they treat a call from a distant friend who lives nearby; you know they aren't just calling to say "hi", they're going to ask you to feed their dog and take in their mail while they're on vacation. Networking is the realm of the desperate; it's an affliction of the professional sect and you can see it coming from a mile away. Fortunately, everyone you will network with already knows that b-school grads are desperate and are simply looking for jobs. And since everyone you contact will have been desperate themselves at one time (and since some of them might become desperate again); they'll talk.



John eventually landed his dream job and sure enough, it came about through networking. Now John is cruising around Southern California in his 1970 black Mustang convertible. John realized that he had learned some very useful tricks while he was job searching. Some of the tricks were so obvious that he wondered why he hadn't heard of them before. Others took a while to develop. But these tricks were the sorts of things you wanted to know *before* you started networking, not after you were done. So Johnny Boy sat down one night with a little bit of agave plant and dumped the following advice into his laptop. Of course, not everything below is applicable to every situation, but John hopes that his "10 Laws of Networking Your Way Into A Job You Actually Want" is useful for you.

Now before you start, be aware that there are only three basic ways we communicate with people; in person, over the phone or by email. All three of these methods have to be primed and ready to go. Some of these points will be painfully obvious, but it's better to be safe than sorry. Therefore:

### In Person:

- A new suit is less than one year old. You're looking for a \$90K job, you can buy a \$300 suit.
- One suit with two ties and two shirts is cheaper than two different suits.
- New suit corollary: a cheap new suit looks much better than an expensive old suit.
- A shirt with no collar buttons looks fancier than one with collar buttons.
- An exceptionally well-tied tie can make up for a bad tie pattern; and few people can tie a tie exceptionally well. Check the net, or ask someone who wears a good knot.
- Black suit, black shoes, black socks or blue suit, black shoes, black socks or blue suit, brown shoes, brown socks. Notice that white socks were not mentioned? (I can't believe I even had to write that but believe me, it's best that I did).
- Don't fuss with your suit. Don't pick lint off of it, stroke your tie or tug on your shirtsleeves so they stick out of your cuffs. Otherwise, you might as well be wearing a sandwich board that says, "I never wear these things".

### On The Phone:

- Don't call from somewhere that your kids/spouse/cat can interrupt or be heard from.
- Don't use a cell phone unless you absolutely trust the connection (and don't move around!).
- Consider a maximum-charge service like USADatNet if you'll be calling long distance often.

- Know *when* to call. Monday am is very bad. Right before the hour changes is also very bad (chance of a meeting starting). Friday afternoons can sometimes be great.
- Be prepared to give an exact time you will be home for a callback and don't screen your calls during that time. True, you might end up watching an unringing phone; that's a chance you will take.
- Don't forget about time zones!

#### By Email:

- Keep **all** of your networking messages. Have a separate folder in Outlook just for networking communications
- Be brief. Not even your mother wants to read your life's story. Three or four sentences can capture almost any message. Three or four paragraphs get trashed.
- If you mean to attach something (like your resume), be sure it's actually attached before you hit send.
- Write your emails anytime, but send them during the day. Your chance of a reply is greater if someone reads your message fresh, rather than it being one of 24 messages that was in their Inbox when they arrived at work.
- Read your messages out loud. The garbage that gets past the spellchecker will amaze you.
- If possible, have someone *else* read your outgoing messages first – at least the important ones.
- Put that Verbal GMAT score to work – don't use weak grammar. Active voice! Cut out unnecessary words. Think of shampoo - Write, wait, revisit, edit, repeat.
- Don't request return receipts. That's just plain creepy.

OK, with those primers on networking in place, it's time to begin.

#### **Rule #1: Know What It Is You Want From Someone**

Nothing is more painful than watching someone stammering over his sentences en route to obliterating his brief opportunity to interact with someone useful. Know *exactly* what it is you want before you begin speaking, and be asking for it in your first or second sentence. In the venture capital world this is called the “elevator pitch”. This is particularly important in group situations when your chance of being interrupted is quite high. You might only want a phone call, a contact, reference, or information on the industry, but figure out what your *goal* is from each contact. For example, “Hi Dennis, I really enjoyed your talk. I'm finishing up my MBA at Cornell and I'd love the chance to talk with you about where the best opportunities are for MBAs in the aerospace industry. Would I be able to give you a call some time next week?” is a specific request with a goal in mind. No waffling.

#### **Rule #2: Be Specific About What You Want**

If you call a recruiter and say you want a job, he will never call you back. If you call that same recruiter and tell him that you want a position in line operations at a fish hatchery in Oregon, you can bet you will be called if he eventually sees that opportunity. Recruiters are looking to make matches. The more specific you can be, the better. That means you can only pitch one function per contact (e.g. “I'm looking at business development **or** private equity” will get you nowhere). Try to narrow your interest as much as possible. Stick to one function and one industry per interaction. Of course, there's nothing wrong with pitching yourself as a marketing person to the marketing VP and a finance person to the finance VP. However, you ought to have separate CVs for this sort of “shotgun” approach.

Specificity is also important in preventing “Ambivalence Paralysis”. Some of John's classmates were overwhelmed by the career options (which are different from career opportunities) available to them. They were willing to take just about any position in any city as long as it didn't involve CAD or electrophoresis gels. This ambivalence makes searching for a job a daunting endeavor. Specificity can resolve this problem. Target one or two cities and focus on firms in those locations. If nothing else, you

can begin to network into these regions and develop a foundation of contacts in them. An overlapping network of contacts in one geographic area is far more powerful than sporadic ones across the globe. Don't ignore opportunities elsewhere, but a focused search is more likely to lead somewhere.

### **Rule #3: Don't Fuss Over The TMO Program Details**

Admittedly, if your resume states the number of months you were in Ithaca, you will be asked about it by anyone with a basic grasp of the Gregorian calendar. However, don't waste precious contact time singling yourself out as different from the other MBAs from the Johnson School. Now, if you still end up being asked about your time in the program or some other explicit program question, go ahead and describe the TMO deal. But consider these two versions before you respond:

Student 1: "I'm in the Twelve-Month Option. It's a one-year program for scientists and engineers."

Usual assumption ("Hmm, this guy didn't take all the courses I took as an MBA.")

Student 2: "I qualified for Cornell's one-year program. It allows individuals with advanced technical degrees to progress through the same two-year curriculum at an accelerated pace".

Usual assumption ("Dang, this guy is sharp.")

### **Rule #4: Plan Your Attack**

Networking is a continuous process but you should be strategic about your timing of it. If you want to work in NY, start your attack there. You don't want to be holding an exploding offer from Toledo before you make significant inroads into the NY community. Additionally, some processes take far longer than others. For example, you might send your resume to the Human Resources Department on day 1. You have a phone interview with HR on day 15. It makes it to the hiring manager on day 19. You are invited for a phone interview with the VP on day 26, which is conducted on day 30. Compare that timeline with speaking to that same VP at a seminar – where you've effectively moved ahead to day 30 almost immediately. Ideally, you will be juggling multiple leads at once. Try to avoid having to take the "bird in the hand".

You also want to have a physical plan. Early on, make a long list of everyone who you intend to contact. Research all of the seminars and conferences you will want to go to. Know when you will make trips to particular cities. Line up a bunch of face-to-face interviews for these trips (in-person meetings are infinitely more valuable than phone calls!). Haphazard job-hunting leads to haphazard jobs. Be strategic in planning out the hunt.

### **Rule #5: Parrot The Host**

There is an old interviewer's saying that "if they can fool you, they can fool your clients". Maybe it's just a way for interviewers to feel good about potentially bad hires, but the gist of the message holds true. So how do you fool the interviewer into loving you? One powerful method is to "parrot" her. This means to behave in a manner that is similar to the interviewers'. If she is laid-back, be somewhat laid-back. If she is focused and direct – be as such. People are generally more comfortable with other people like them so let the interviewer set the tone. True, there is a lot to be said for being yourself and seeking out the right "fit", but there is a lot to be said for making it to the second round of interviews, as well. You clearly shouldn't be someone you're not, so don't play yourself off as an actor, but a little bit of behavioral modification can be a wonderful thing.

## **Rule #6: Know How To Win The Phone Game**

For informational interviews, don't just call someone from an unprepared position. Plan out your moves in detail. You should definitely write down the keywords for three or four basic questions (any more is unnecessary). Nothing is more foolish than the old line of, "Hmm, there was something I wanted to ask you but it escapes me right now...". When the conversation stalls, you can bet that 80% of people will ask you, "So, is there anything else you'd like to know?" At that point, you have the right to one or possibly two more questions – have them ready. Be aware that the "Is there anything..." question is also your signal that the person is just about through with you. Don't be a hog; you will do more damage than good for your cause if you stay on the line too long.

Have some notes nearby. I like to have recent press releases to refer to (as my brain often blanks out soon after I hear the other person say "Hello?"). Depending on the call, it may be wise to have your internet connection fired up on the company's web page. If it's a conference call, jot down everyone's name during the introductions for thank-you notes. Remember, having to say, "Let me get a pen" is code for "Let me show you how disorganized I am".

Try to speak about 20% of the time and most of that should be in the first 2 minutes. People are less likely to realize how you are wasting their day when they are expounding gems of career wisdom to you. Never interrupt the speaker – wait until their thought is completed and if absolutely necessary, ask about a certain issue that was mentioned. Don't disagree with anything. Even if you think that venture capital investments are heading upwards, if your contact says they are going to drop, let it be. You are looking for a friend and a favor; not a heated discussion. When someone has completed a thought, allow a slight pause to occur before you speak again. This gives the other person a chance to add more content (just don't appear to be distracted!). And at the end of the call, always, always, always ask your contact if there is someone they would recommend you speak with further about X. This keeps the contact branch going and very few people will ever answer that question with a "No".

## **Rule #7: Use Every Outlet Possible**

Many of my more advanced leads came from highly unlikely and completely unforeseeable sources. Looking for work in Providence, RI? Contact the Boston, MA Cornell alumni group. That guy from the plant pathology department? His wife might be Carly Fiorina's sister. Networks are often described as trees – contacts leading to more contacts and branching out from there. In contrast, I believe that networks are probably more similar to sea urchins – thousands of 1- and 2-person deep projections emanating from a single source – you. You have connections to many more corporate players than you realize (remember Seven Degrees Of Separation To Kevin Bacon?). The task is to be on alert with everyone you meet. You are either looking for work or you are not. There shouldn't be any in-between. Everyone is a potential source.

Be sure to let **everyone** know exactly what it is you want to find (see #2). Many of my best network effects came through unsolicited sources (e.g. friends who knew what I wanted and stumbled across good leads for me). Some others came from people I sat next to on the plane, a former co-worker's husband and even an undergrad I met at a party. Networking is like scratching lottery tickets. Most of them are dead ends, but any one of them could be a gem – including the next one.

## **Rule #8: Use Cornellians To Your Advantage; Putting Others To Work On Your Behalf:**

There are a lot of them out there, and many of them have their bios online. So you want to work at NewcoGen, huh? And you are about to cold-call the CFO, eh? Wait just a second. First check out that Management Bio page on their website and do a quick Cntl-F search for "Cornell". What's that? The

General Counsel is a Cornell undergrad? Excellent. “Dear Ms. General Counsel, my name is John Suntimo and I am a second-year MBA student at Cornell. I would like to speak with [CFO] about where someone with my skill set is best suited in your industry. I noticed that you are an alumnus from the Law School and I was wondering if you would you be willing to make an introduction to Mr. X for me?”

This approach is powerful for two reasons. First, you are asking an alumnus to do a very small favor that will make them feel better about not donating to the Annual Fund last year. Second, rather than cold calling the CFO, you will end up being referred from an internal, executive source. The CFO is not likely to ignore his own General Counsel’s message. And of course, if the GC snubs you, you still retain the option of cold-calling the CFO. You paid a lot of money for this place, you might as well use everything it offers.

### **Rule #9: You Get Two Chances Before You Are A Pest**

This is simply a truth of business communications. You pretty much become a pest the third time you interact with someone. In a perfect world, you request something, the other person delivers, and you thank them and maybe provide them with your CV. In an imperfect world, you email someone, then follow up with your CV, then follow up and see where things are, twice, and end up in contention for the Annoying Pest Award. Admittedly, there is some value in being committed to a cause, but be careful (especially you car salesmen!). You only have a few shots on net before someone groans when they see a message from you in their Inbox. Make contact #1 and #2 count, then move on to the people they referred you to. How to make the first two count? Keep them short and keep them simple. Make it easy for people to help you by telling them exactly what you are looking for.

### **Rule #10: Keep Impeccable Records**

Would you like to be withdrawn from consideration for a job? Send an introductory email to someone who you’ve already sent an introductory email to. It is imperative to keep pristine records of your communications. First impressions are vital. Venture capitalists call this ‘pissing in the well’. If you don’t come across well in interaction #1, you’re hardly going to be looked at in interaction #2. You should have a separate folder (away from your SPAM) for all of your job-hunting communications. You will want to know how long it has been since you’ve spoken with someone, you will want to know what was said, you will want to know who referred you to whom. And of paramount importance, you will want to keep notes from your conversations so that *when* you tap someone again six months later, you have something to remind them about who you are. Additionally, you will want to email every single person you communicated with and thank them for assisting you in your job search when you finally land your position (this is best done after you have your new email address). You will become incredibly adept at collecting business cards. Before you leave a seminar or meeting, write down notes about each person you met on their cards. Include where you met them if you are prone to forget this sort of thing. Nothing hurts quite so much as looking at a CEO’s card and not remembering what interaction you had with that person (or worse, citing the wrong meeting to them!)

### **Bonus Tip: All else being equal, find high-dividend contacts**

You’ve only got 12 months to meet as many people (and hopefully more) than your peers of the 21-month program. Therefore, every contact should count and should be someone who might be able to help you beyond this year. Consider this: three guys are in a room; the CEO of Amgen, a venture capitalist and the registration guy for the conference you’re all attending who also tends bar at Bibi’s. Who is the go-to guy? The VC. Why? The Amgen CEO will probably *not* reply to your messages following your 2-3 minutes together because he also met 27 other MBAs. The registration guy is useless once you leave Ithaca. The VC, however, has a portfolio of 10 or 20 firms that are growing and staffing up. When the

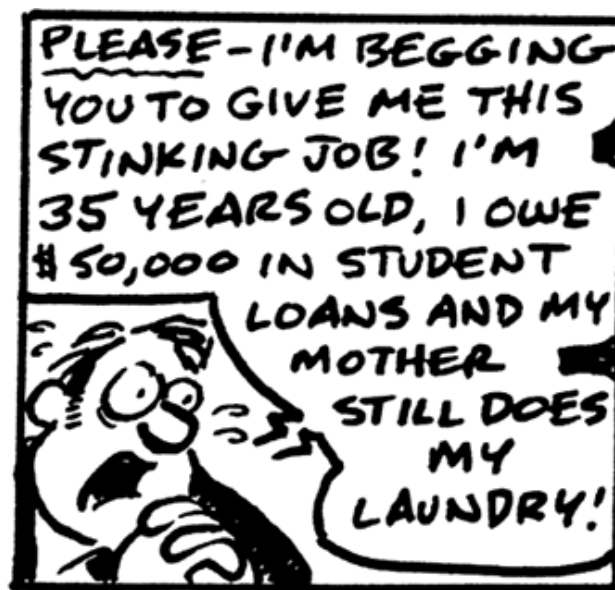
VC says to a portfolio executive, “Hey, I’ve got a kid for you to look at”, the private company will often listen. The lesson? Be strategic and think long-term.

### Summary:

Networking is as much an art as it is a skill. You will get better at it as you do more of it. Unfortunately, by the time you get really good at it you don’t need to do it anymore. Sometimes it takes a little while to get the hang of it. John would say that it makes sense to save the really good leads for after you’ve become comfortable with the “dance of the networker”. Additionally, don’t forget to maintain your contacts *after* you have your dream job. It’s not because you might need them again (although you might), but rather, it’s proper business etiquette. John once had a hell of a time getting through to a ’96 JGSM grad. He later found out that the grad had been very helpful to a student but the student never said thanks or let the grad know where the student ended up – until the student tapped into the grad for more favors. Cornell is a family. Be humble, be thankful, and be in occasional touch.

You can’t underestimate the power of networking. For example, John submitted his resume for a position at a biotech company. He believed he was a strong candidate for the job but he heard nary a peep from the firm. Two months later, John shared his search objective with a friend (friend meaning a guy from the rec. league they both played in whose last name he didn’t know– see Rule #7). The friend was an architect for that biotech firm’s new building. The friend had a professional contact at the company. The contact was married to the Director of HR. The HR Director passed John’s CV to an HR Associate and asked the Associate if John would be good for “Diane’s position”. The HR Associate replied that unfortunately, the position was recently filled, but that John *would have been* a great candidate for it. Yes, this was the same position John **had** applied for a month earlier. What was the difference between the spammed resume and the serious consideration? John was well referred the second time. *There is probably nothing more powerful than being well-referred!*

The first job is the hardest one to get after your MBA. TMOs, almost by definition, face the challenge of changing careers in their job hunt. However, a rapid transition into the quirky world of the business professional can make the process far easier. Sometimes it’s a game, and sometimes you sell out to play it, but sometimes that’s how the job market works. Good luck.



Cartoon by Kerry Soper