

Networking: Introductory Principles

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The intention here isn't to resolve questions at this stage, especially, but more to set the stage – describe why the questions about networking are so important to what we're trying to achieve, and hope for.

Why network?

I'm going to start by saying I'm not a natural networker. But I've worked as a senior PR in a children's hospital. You might think that's a role that demands consummate networking skills, and you'd be right. But when the trust profiled my team I came out as the most introverted – but also the most creative. I'm a creative introvert – a born researcher, you could say. So my emotional response if asked to network is to wonder why I am possibly needed to do anything so alien. Yet I find the need to network, and the rewards from it, immensely valuable. It defines us, certainly professionally, in ways that have nothing to do with your demeanour.

Acting on that fact has made me a campaigner, all of my working life. I first saw the astonishing power that popular and determined networks can give thousands of otherwise disconnected people during the anti-nuclear movement in the 1980s: the will and means to change the world and make the powerful listen. Surely, one of the goals of journalism itself.

Networking has shaped the professional me – not the alone me. The value of networking runs deep, for all of us. And we are made more valuable, more valued, by them.

Networks make us better professionally

For finding sources, as journalists and PRs. You won't get far without them. And the time you have to put in to finding them indicates their importance. One of the hardest things for a relative newcomer or non-specialist to do is find and keep reliable sources, and of course journalists guard their sources, as do PRs – rightly. The aim of networking here isn't to give away sources, but to make it easier for people to acquire them, with the right skill set, training, and resources.

Networks give us other contacts, for a whole host of reasons. Again, getting names and introductions from other trusted people and information sources – just what a network with the right knowledge will yield.

Networks help in getting the job done in the time we have. If you had to start from scratch, without knowing where you could get information and comment quickly, the job would be impossible.

This is becoming a bigger problem: for specialists, effects of churnalism; for generalists, the need to understand complexities and know who to ask. It's vital to have trusted people and

sources you already know – networks. Not to give anyone an ‘unfair advantage’ in getting the story, or getting it told. But to help them do their job.

Networking makes us better ethically

Networks do this by defining what is ethical in the first place: codes of conduct, the values underpinning them, the principles they describe – all defined by professional networks, consensus within a peer group. For UK journalists, the NUJ has a code of conduct offering that. The International Federation of Journalists Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists reflects similar values. The CIPR offers similar values for UK PRs for PR, including health.

They also do this by helping us reach an ethical decision. Information about ethical matters, peer groups who rule on ethical decisions – networks, or reliable information from them. All of the organisations I’ve referred to do that, as do others.

Finally, networks help us act on those decisions. Group support. By signing up to the values of a professional network we have that network behind us so we know any decision we make is the better for it – and we have the support of that network if that decision is overruled or marginalised.

This is massively important in the workplace. And massively under attack. One of the most disturbing trends I’ve seen as a health PR is precisely what happens to ethical standards when the networks are not there – and personal courage and integrity simply aren’t enough.

What should be done about it?

A prime example – already achieved – is the *First Do No Harm* conference and its aim. *First Do No Harm* has started addressing just that point, which is to:

- Advocate more training. Because you need to understand, not just know, when it comes to health.
- Facilitate use of resources that are practical. Because you need to gain understanding and knowledge within the time and money you’ve got available.
- Encourage social connections – networks – to give us the first two. Otherwise you won’t achieve them, or will constantly struggle to.

What networking should not be about

Reinventing the wheel

There are many excellent resources and people already. It would be wasteful and futile to ignore them. To give value, networking has to avoid aimless repetition.

Exclusivity/elitism.

This shouldn't be about denying or excluding anyone because they are not a health specialist. We need to include anyone who has to 'handle' health, and ensure they have the resources, training, people and support they need to do their job accurately. There are fundamental, sound reasons why anyone who is called on to 'handle' health must be as well prepared and connected as possible to deliver a good result.

Compromising on standards or diminishing the role of the specialist

This is about maintaining them, as well as for everybody. So maybe it's for the specialists to gauge where best practice lies, and then for networks to ensure it's there for everyone who needs it.

How much can we do?

A case study is the *First Do No Harm* conference.

We have already achieved remarkable results in holding this event. Through networking, in our own efforts, our own time, and in nearly all cases with only or largely our own money. We've managed our own mini-trend: world top ranking in Google for 'health journalism, constantly in the top 4 over the past 3 months. Same story for 'health journalism and PR' as a term.

Over 50 delegates attended. Committed, professional, networked people from 4 continents, again almost all self-funded. There were at least as many who were just as committed but couldn't attend and are waiting to hear about what the conference came up with.

Limits, risks and hope

The principal limitation is funding. Money. We do need to be mindful of that. And determined about finding some ways of getting some. Because, although we are few, we are also many. In the sense of the values we're working to, the support we're getting already, and the commitment we're seeing already.

All because of networking. Which means that we are all greater than we could ever be in acting alone. By looking at why we are networking, and how we can, we can become many more. And we need to. For ourselves. For others. For journalism. For health provision.

And that, of course, is where health journalism and PR have a unique effect – on health itself.

That gives me grounds for hope, and why a creative introvert is saying 'This is why networks matter'.

Why Network? Because, for us, where we are, in what we do – they will matter. They must. It remains for us to decide, in our expanding network, what we're going to do, and be, next.