

Strategizing your way to success in Hollywood, even if you don't live there.

Nothing is more common in Hollywood than extremely talented people who have not achieved success. While there are various and innumerable reasons, lack of access is, unquestionably, one major component. The barriers to entry into the tight-knit entertainment industry are so great, next to having talent, networking is, arguably, the most important skill one must cultivate in a town that thrives on nepotism. Networking is an integral part of how the system works and if one wants to be part of the game, one just has to invest in building relationships and expanding his circle of connections. The old adage “it’s all about who you know” is alive and well in Tinseltown, but more importantly, “who knows you ... and how well” is what gets your foot in the door.

The term “networking” sometimes has a negative connotation as it conjures up images of unabashed self-promotion. This inference usually tends to come from people who are not good at networking and condescend as a defense mechanism. Whether they want to admit it or not, everyone networks at some level. One may think that people at the highest echelons do not network, but they do. If you are using your significant credentials to entice a young actor, producer, writer or director to do business with you over dinner, lunch or in a meeting, or you send congratulatory gifts to someone to acknowledge an accomplishment, you are networking.

I think of networking as the ability to use ANY opportunity to build rapport and cultivate relationships that could potentially provide inroads or access, and if you're lucky, even long-term friendships.

There is networking and there is effective networking. Too many people network with the wrong attitude, intention and tools, and all of these produce little or no results. If you attend a networking event and no one knows you were there, you have been ineffective. If you focus only on yourself and what you can get from others, you have also failed. Effective networking is about sharing and caring, taking an interest in others, setting the foundation for a welcome follow-up, and creating an opportunity to build rapport.

Expand Your Circle

Networking requires commitment. That means if you (seriously) want to generate interest in your talents or services, you have to be actively engaged in doing so. Attend events. If you live in Los Angeles, there is an abundance of industry-related events you can attend, many of which are listed in trade publications like *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Daily Variety*, and *Back Stage West and East*. If you live outside L.A., it's easy to find out what's going on in your local community simply by getting on the Internet. Distance, however, should not be a factor in the pursuit of your career. Many networking events in major cities, depending on the scope and size, host attendees from all over the region, and sometimes all over the country, as well as overseas. How important is your career to you?

Join or participate in online entertainment industry communities, as well as organizations, groups, and professional associations that offer lectures, screenings, courses and, best of all, networking opportunities. Networking in your peer group is essential. Connect and share with those in your writing group, acting class, theatre company, etc. These are the people who will be making strides in the industry and you want to cultivate these relationships now. Lastly, create new opportunities for yourself. Consider starting your own small group for networking purposes as well as to get valuable feedback on your material.

Nurture Your Relationships

I recommend that you get to know as many individuals in Hollywood as possible without using people. Take advantage of opportunities to be of service. The whole idea is to expand your circle of connections, build relationships, and earn trust. Talent on its own will not open doors. The likability factor is crucial. People want to help those whom they like. Now, while they may help you in some way, most will generally not share valuable contacts unless they have developed a relationship with you. So, when nurturing your new relationships with people who can enhance your upward mobility, do not ask for

favours. They don't yet know you and have no reason to go out on a limb. However, when someone makes a recommendation on your behalf, represent him well on all levels because your performance will be a reflection on his judgment. You should also keep in touch with those potential contacts whom you meet at networking events as well as in everyday life. As things happen for you, send an e-mail of your progress or accomplishments—you want people to know that you are doing things. They will be impressed. As you expand your network, be prepared to do lunch/coffee/drinks and to send little gifts—“thank you”—as appropriate.

Build Your Confidence

You don't have to be an extrovert to be an effective networker. Granted, it takes a little courage to walk up to strangers, introduce yourself, and start a conversation. If you are shy, the concept can be quite intimidating and sometimes uncomfortable. Therefore, find a friend to go with you for support. DON'T sit talking with your friend for the duration of the event—you could have done that at home. Instead, as soon as you can, wean yourself off and meet people. Ask questions—that prevents you (initially) from talking too much about yourself and engages the other person in conversation. Find common interests and note any interesting tidbits (especially helpful in follow-up calls, e-mails, or thank-you gifts). Networking is something you'll do over the long haul of your career, so get used to it. Master it.

If the people who can hire you or use your services in Hollywood do not know you exist, you need to network! You could be the best writer, producer, director, actor, cinematographer or costumer that ever lived, but if you lack connections and your talent hasn't yet attracted the attention of people who can open doors for you, you need to network. How often should you network? As often as you can! 🍷

Read more of Sandra Lord's networking tips in the September/October issue of *Script*.