

# the “meet” of the matter

**Y**ou’ve probably heard this one: “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” I disagree. I believe that what you know and who you know are equally important.

I also believe that what you know about who you know is extremely important.

In addition to what you’re learning in school, there are certain skills that will greatly improve your chances of succeeding in the real world. These skills are communication skills, networking skills, and people skills.

All successful business people can point to one item that is the key to their success. It’s never a \$20,000 phone system, a \$5,000 computer, or a \$400 desk. It’s almost always a \$9.95 Rolodex. Rolodex is just a fancy name for an address book. The names, addresses, and phone numbers found in a Rolodex represent contacts that are made by its owner. These contacts are made and developed over many years. They are a definite key to success. I wouldn’t sell my list of contacts and the

“A wise man knows everything. A smart man knows everyone. A successful man knows both.”

Ancient Chinese Proverb

relationships that go with them for a million dollars. In the real world, the person with the most contacts has a huge advantage.

Who are these contacts?

They are the acquaintances you make as you travel through life. They

are your classmates, your teammates, your parents' friends, and your friends' parents. They are the people you meet at work, at church, at the mall, etc.

In the future, these contacts will become your clients, your customers, your colleagues, your employers, and your solutions to problems. They will be your advisors, your mentors, and your friends. You will learn from them and lean on them. These are contacts. They are not connections. They are not people that you meet, use, and then throw away. These are contacts and your relationship with them is a two-way street. Over the years, you will help them and they will help you.

Quite simply, these contacts are your future.

When should you begin making these contacts? Today. Tomorrow is too late. Don't waste today. There will always be another tomorrow to experience new things. But once today has become yesterday, you can't get it back. Those 24 hours are gone for good. Yesterday is only as good as how it was used when it was today.

One of society's greatest myths is the belief that contacts are only made between adults. The average person believes this to be true. The average person is wrong, and this book is not about being average.

When I was 19, I left school for the third time. My grades were good, but I was bored. Sound familiar? I was scared to death to tell my parents that I had left school again. The first couple of times I quit weren't so tough, because I always knew I'd go back. But when I left for the third time, I knew I was done. I put off telling my parents for several weeks. By the time I finally got the nerve to break the news, they had already figured it out. My dad took me to breakfast

that Saturday morning, which was a tradition whenever I was home for the weekend. After breakfast, he pulled into the parking lot at his office and parked his little green Toyota as far from the entrance as possible. I had a feeling we weren't going into the office for coffee and donuts.

Radio off. Ignition off. Windows down. When the windows went down, I knew I was in for the long haul. This was his favorite place to give a lecture, so I just sat back and prepared to take my medicine. I will spare you the agony of that next 60 minutes and just share a few of his thoughts.

He reminded me that my grandfather had been an attorney. He didn't need to remind me that he himself was also an attorney. Nor did he need to remind me that I was his oldest son, had been blessed with a good mind, and had a real future in the legal profession. No, he really didn't need to refresh my memory on any of these issues, but he did.

His final remarks were, "You don't know what you're going to do. You don't know where you're going to do it. And now, you won't even have a college education. What if things don't work out for you? What will you fall back on?"

"Fall back." Those two words stuck in my mind like a bad dream. I wondered if he thought I was doomed to fail at whatever I did next. I knew my father was disappointed. But as I would learn later in life, disappointment is something we all have to deal with occasionally.

At my house, when you were out of school you were out of the house. It's not like my parents threw my stuff out into the street, but they did give me a "departure" date. Hello real world. Even worse, I was officially off the parental payroll. Sounded brutal to me at the time, but nothing could have been better for my future.

Since I had no money, no job, and no plan, I did the most practical thing I could think of. I went on a road trip to Florida. I've never believed that worrying could solve a single problem. On the other hand, I've always believed that thinking can solve almost anything. What better place to think than the beaches of Florida?

As I stretched out by the pool at the Ramada Resort on Fort Walton Beach, I looked up at the oceanside hotel rooms and tried to imagine

what they were like. I could only imagine, since I had actually spent my last few dollars to stay at a fleabag motel across the street. Okay, so I snuck into the Ramada Resort that day. Give me a break. I had some heavy thinking to do, and I didn't believe a fleabag motel was a very good place to think.

Before I had time to start my heavy thinking, I noticed a guy walking toward my chair. I just knew he was with hotel security and that he was coming over to kick me off the property. I made the transition from thinking to worrying in about four seconds.

To my great surprise, he called me by my name. Now I felt like a real criminal. Not only was he going to kick me out, but he knew who I was. How embarrassing! The sun was in my eyes, so I couldn't see the guy's face. I was expecting handcuffs but got a handshake instead. His name was David Brantley. He was from Louisiana and had just started a company that specialized in the construction of tennis courts. His company was young but growing. He explained that his background was in construction, but he needed some help. He needed a link to the tennis community. David Brantley had the knowledge, but he needed contacts. Fortunately, I had made lots of those.

I was only 19, but I had spent the past six years crisscrossing the country playing tennis. As I traveled, I met hundreds of people from all walks of life. I had filled my address book with the names, addresses, and phone numbers of everyone I met, both young and old. This was one piece of advice that I took from my parents.

I got excited as David and I talked about the company he had started. I couldn't stop thinking about that Saturday morning in the parking lot with my dad. I couldn't wait to call him. It had taken me a while to figure it out, but now I had an answer to his question. I would "fall back" on the contacts I had spent so many years making and developing.

I did fall back on those contacts, and I did work with David Brantley — for 13 great years. We built a multimillion-dollar company that installed tennis courts, running tracks, and yes, even playground surfaces. Throughout my career, I always looked to my contacts for their advice, support, and help. I could not have succeeded without them.

Isn't it amazing that David Brantley and I were in the same city, at the same pool, on the same day? Not really. I don't believe in coincidences.

But he knew my name when he saw me at the pool. How do you explain that? That's easy. I met David Brantley in Dallas, Texas, when I was 15. We met through a mutual friend.

"I have never let my schooling interfere with my education."

Mark Twain

Who would have thought we would meet again, five years later? Who would have thought we would work together for 13 years? Who would have thought we would build a multimillion-dollar company together?

If you had told me then that I could meet someone when I was 15 with whom I would later build a multimillion-dollar company, I would have laughed in your face. If you told me that same story today, we could laugh together — all the way to the bank.

What happened to me happens to lots of people. And yes, it could easily happen to you. You just never know.

The formula is pretty simple. Success = knowledge + skills + people. The more people you meet, the better your chances of succeeding will be, regardless of which career you ultimately choose.

Here's a great example. What if I come to your school and take you and 99 of your closest friends to the mall. When we get to the mall I will buy every one of you a brand new pair of tennis shoes. Not a bad deal so far, right?

When we arrive at the mall we see a store at the east end that sells every style of tennis shoes you have ever heard of. We also see a store at the west end of the mall that sells every style of tennis shoes available. The prices at both stores are identical. So, the same shoes are available at both stores, and the prices are the same at both stores. The only difference between these two stores is that you and your 99 friends have another really good friend who works, on commission, at the east mall store. Now when we get to the mall, where do you think you will buy your shoes?

Of course, you will buy them from the east mall store where your friend works. Not because the east mall store has a better selection of

shoes, and not because the east mall store has better prices. The only reason all 100 of you are going to buy your shoes from the east mall store is because your good friend works there.

This is exactly how it works in the business world, too. People do business with people they know, with people they like, and with their friends. Strangers come last on the list. This is why it's so important for young people to meet as many people as they can. And to stay in touch with everyone they meet. People make people successful.

Some of you may not be comfortable with the idea of meeting new people. Don't let this concern you. Making contacts is a skill that you develop over time. "Develop" is the key word here. Like any skill, this one takes practice to improve. It's not a game. You can't win or lose and no one is keeping score. The secret to making contacts at an early age is simple. You must make an effort to meet new people every day. You can meet these people everywhere: at school, church, camp, the mall, the park, at home, at concerts, on planes, at restaurants, etc. The list goes on and on. Meet all kinds of people: old, young, rich, poor, black, white, gay, straight. The more you meet, the more you grow. The more diversity in the contacts you make, the more you will learn, and the more valuable your contacts will be.

Don't be afraid to talk to people you don't know, especially those who are older than you. I know you probably grew up just like I did, with everyone telling you not to talk to strangers. That was bad advice. They should have told us not to talk to *strange* strangers. There are a lot of people you don't know yet that you need to talk to. These are the people who can help you achieve your dreams and reach your goals. Remember, nobody succeeds in business on their own. Nobody succeeds without help. Now is the time to start talking to strangers. Stop and think about it. Everyone you know today was a stranger before you met them, right?

Never miss a chance to meet a friend of a friend. This is an easy, comfortable contact to make. And who knows? That friend of your friend might have a cousin, who has a brother, who has an aunt, who owns a company that might hire you someday. That, I promise you, is how it works in the real world.