

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnerships, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Social Sciences Team

Developing and Maintaining a Network

What is a Network?

A network is a system of relationships in which people exchange information and resources to achieve common goals or serve common interests. Networks are easy to join or leave and tend to be informal. However, networking can also take place through planned meetings. These meetings may or may not meet regularly and may or may not pursue joint initiatives.

Networking is a process for expanding resources while maintaining your organizational autonomy. For most, the motivating factor for being in a network is the access to valuable information and the expertise of others in the group. With more people involved, creativity and options increase. Networks can also provide a strong support system.

Why Should I Network?

The Conservation Partnership at all levels can use networking to enhance its involvement with various customer sectors, including expansion of contacts to include non-traditional customer groups. Networking also helps to identify and meet customer needs. It promotes understanding of groups and their respective missions. Networking can raise people's awareness of their relationship to the environment and community. Networking can keep The Conservation Partnership's diverse customer base aware of its stake in the USDA.

Financial advisors suggest that we put aside 10 percent of our income

as an investment for our future needs, including retirement. What investments in the form of time and people contacts are you making for the future of conservation work? With a decreasing percentage of the population actively involved in farming, it is in the best interest of groups and agencies that once considered agriculture their primary customer to expand their definition of "customer" to include a broader base. A diverse network of people that know and support our mission will help to sustain that mission even as technology changes the world and the way that work gets done. What if you spent just one or two percent more of your time in building

Why Should I Network, con't.

relationships, public relations, or marketing your agency or organization to people who currently do not know you? You would certainly increase the size of your network. This type of social investment will yield stronger public support both now and in the future.

With Whom Should I Network?

Answer the following questions to help you identify people and organizations that share your goals and that might benefit from participation in your network.

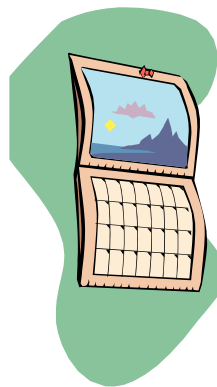
1. **Who shares our issue?**
2. **Who shares our customers?**
3. **Who has resources we need?**
4. **Who needs our resources?**
5. **Who has a similar mission / vision?**
6. **Who might be a “resistor”?**



Assemble a list to include community leaders and representatives from organizations outside traditional conservation groups. Evaluate who in different sectors of the community should be part of your network. Remember to scan your Rolodex and/or address book. Acting on these lists can expand your network.

When Should I Network?

Prepare in advance. Start networking now! It is important to establish your network before you need it. Building a network takes time and requires you to be proactive. Do not wait until the last minute to start building a network. Waiting until



the need is crucial can reduce your effectiveness and integral community leaders may be less available or receptive. If you wait until the last minute, your contacts may consider you a “user” rather than a colleague.

Steps in Building a Network

To help yourself prepare for networking, outline your goals. Decide what outcomes you want from the network relationships and, from there, determine who are potential network members. Prospective members must believe there will be some benefit to them to be part of the network and to actively participate. In a network, resources are shared on a reciprocal basis. (“I’m willing to share with you because you share with me.”)

An important step is an information exchange. Discuss mutual interests and determine what you can do for each other. At an initial meeting bring one or two key information pieces, such as a brochure that outlines your Agency’s or organization’s mission, purpose, and main services or activities. Do not be hesitant to identify potential resources for them in your growing network. Explore with them aspects of their networks and the contacts they have.

Once networking has begun, decide the mode(s) of communication for keeping in contact. Some poten-

tial ways to maintain contacts in a network are telephone calls, face-to-face visits, e-mail, newsletters, listserves, presentations, meeting attendance, fairs, etc. Follow up regularly so that members of the network do not lose the feeling or awareness of an active connection. Consider developing a time schedule to remain on track. In the beginning, more frequent contacts may be appropriate- but once established, impersonal or personal contacts every few months should be sufficient to maintain a relationship.

Keep track of your networking contacts with a Rolodex or a computer. In addition to names and numbers, it is helpful to note the role of the contact in their organization and the nature of their needs as well as their resources. Noting the date and content of the most recent contact will help you determine the timing for follow-up. In order to maintain the networking relationship, continuing contact is important even if various people in the network are not involved in an active issue.

Create Opportunities for Networking

Join a club or organization that will expand your network. Be selective, target your networking where you see new opportunities to expand awareness of your agency or organization’s expertise or to build a partnership. Perhaps your objective might be to diversify your contacts and future clientele.

Consider hosting a local Chamber of Commerce “after hours” networking event, as was done by a Michigan USDA Service Center. Provide updates of your activities with public officials, such as county commissioners, city officials, the mayor, school superintendents, chamber of commerce executives, or other community leaders. If you sponsor an exhibit, be friendly and outgoing to the customers your exhibit attracts.

Ask professional colleagues, members of organizations to which you belong, and acquaintances to introduce you to their friends and people with whom they work. It is usually easy to establish a rapport with a friend of a friend. Volunteer to help on a community event or project. At a professional group meeting assume a leadership role if needed. Again, target those relationships you want to build and the opportunities you have to cultivate awareness.

Create Opportunities, con't.

Develop a program that raises awareness about the Agency's mission and your activities. Select at least two community groups who are unfamiliar with your agency or organization. Contact the president of the organization and offer to provide a 5, 10, or 30-minute presentation. Consider PTAs, senior citizen groups, local union groups, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, neighborhood associations, watershed groups, civic organizations and church groups.



Characteristics of a Person Who Networks Effectively

Above all, networking is an attitude – yours and the other person or organization. It is a “win-win” perspective. A successful networker is always open to conversations with people about what they need and then is willing to share resources, information, and contacts.

As you get others to see you, NRCS, and The Conservation Partnership as helpful resources, they will tell others about you, and your functional network will expand. People in your network will

be there when you need their support for the development and implementation of conservation initiatives. To be most effective in networking a person needs to relate well to diverse people, listen to others, accept their ideas, be optimistic, and develop good oral and written communication skills.

*“I use not only all the brains
I have, but all I can borrow.”*

*-Woodrow Wilson
28th U.S. President*

How to Manage Conflict in Networks

People will disagree and networks are not immune from conflict. After accepting that conflict may happen, provide the opportunity for the conflicting parties to explain their respective viewpoints and support efforts for a joint resolution. It is also helpful to give honest feedback to minimize areas where conflict may erupt. Often the problem can be worked out if everyone participates in a discussion of the situation and looks for the common ground on which to build a consensus. If this does not work, a mediator may be needed to help clarify each party's responsibilities and assist with settlement of differences. It is important to work on only one conflict at a time. If multiple issues are being addressed, the focus can get clouded and make a satisfactory conclusion more difficult.

Tips on Maintaining an Effective Network

Networking involves repeated interactions among people in an effort to build rapport and trust. You need to invest your time in order to gain benefits from a network. Remember, the heart of networking is awareness, communication, and mutual benefits.

1. Network with everyone all the time.
2. Don't neglect your existing networks.
3. Seek out the most useful contacts.
4. Join professional associations, civic groups, or other local groups and devote time and energy to them.
5. Make sure the group is the right organization for you.
6. Follow up, follow up, follow up!
7. Develop or distribute informational pamphlets that you think will be of interest.
8. Get on newsletter distribution lists.
9. Create your own newsletter.
10. Keep in touch by e-mail and other methods. Don't just contact people when you need something.
11. Share information with others in your network. Consider exchanging reports, announcements, brochures, books, tapes, or videos with others in your network.
12. Offer your services, attend, co-sponsor, and sponsor conferences, workshops, seminars, lectures, field days, and annual meetings.
13. Present papers or give presentations to traditional and non-traditional customers.
14. Read local, as well as national and international newspapers, and journals. Many key individuals are discovered and then contacted through local publications.
15. Develop joint training opportunities or projects.
16. Keep your message focused and upbeat.
17. Say "thank you"! An e-mail message works, but a hand-written note of thanks is more effective.

Examples of Networks

It is not the title of a group but, rather, the form of relationships that evolve and the purpose of the exchange that determines whether the team form is a network, a partnership, or a collaboration. Here are some examples of networks:

- Professional colleagues in and outside your organization that you approach for information
- Breakfast update sessions, open houses, coffee circles, or a Chamber of Commerce's Business After Hours meeting that you attend and that are held by elected officials or organizations for the purpose of sharing information
- Ongoing network meetings you convene with community members to regularly exchange ideas or information
- Persons you telephone, e-mail, or otherwise make contact with on a frequent basis to gain perspective, get feedback, and share ideas
- Networking groups or organizations you might join and whose monthly or occasional meetings you attend, such as Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, Business and Professional Women, Jaycees, General Federation of Women's Clubs, Lions Club, or other civic or special interest groups including environmental or conservation groups.



Where do I find more information?

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