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“I always have at least two general conversational exchanges before I ask, ‘What’s your line of work?’”

The Sky’s Not Limited

How to network successfully anywhere – even in the air

He sees “every day as one big prospecting opportunity.” He’s Dave Topus, a sales messaging and personal branding consultant who is so persistent in his quest for leads that he regularly takes airplane flights just to meet new clients. Imagine that. Going through all that airport hoopla when you don’t have to.

“It started when I gradually realized over the years that I’d met many of my business contacts on planes,” says Topus. “I thought, why not use air travel in a more structured and formalized way?”

One of Topus’s recent midair successes occurred when he happened to be seated beside a CEO on a flight between his hometown of Atlanta and New York. “We chatted and I gave him an idea for something he was working on,” Topus recalls. “At the end of the flight we exchanged contact information and agreed to get back in touch. Lo and behold, the next day when I was flying back, there he was again on the same plane.” Their second conversation led to a \$75,000 consulting engagement for Topus. (Hint: Topus uses frequent-flier miles for upgrades to make sure he’s networking with the first-classers.)

“During my past twenty years as a communications consultant and trainer,” says Topus, “my success has depended upon my ability to build my pipeline and find decision makers. I think most people view networking too narrowly. Everybody is meetable.”

On another flight, Topus met a retired CEO who was ultimately able to introduce him to the key people in the company he’d just left. “Not every contact is a decision maker, but often they can lead you, directly or indirectly, to the person you need to meet,” says Topus.

On another occasion, Topus, who claims, “I can strike up a conversation with anybody,” began chatting with a woman and her little dog outside an Irish pub. “I asked her how old the dog was,” he says, “and in the meantime I noticed she

interesting idea

Think of every day as a prospecting opportunity.

had California license plates. It turned out her husband was a sales manager, and they’d just transferred to Atlanta. Once he came out and joined us, I was able to establish quickly what his business was all about, who the VP of sales was, and whether he thought she’d be receptive to contact from me.”

So how do you get this much information from a stranger without coming off as, in Topus’s words, the “crazy stalker guy outside the Irish pub”? He says, “The key element is to be authentically curious, to approach people in non-

threatening ways. The qualifying process has to happen quickly but also with subtlety, and it always begins with a conversation starter. Just a line or two that gauges the person's willingness to engage."

If there doesn't happen to be a cute dog around, Topus suggests asking, "How do you like your laptop?" It's a harmless query that segues easily into how people use their laptops and ergo, what kind of work they do. While in line at Starbucks, he might ask, "Nothing like a strong cup of coffee, is there?" If people don't respond, Topus drops it, but if they indicate a willingness to talk he might ask them how many cups of coffee they have a day or if caffeine helps them stay alert on the job – another casual, non-threatening way to turn the talk to business.

"I always have at least two general conversational exchanges before I ask, 'What's your line of work?'" says Topus. "It's less intrusive than [approaching people] and immediately asking them what they do for a living. The best conversational open-

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"I can strike up a conversation with anybody."

ers are circumstantial and based on what's going on in the moment. If you and the other person experience or observe something together, like maybe there's an irate passenger across the way, notice how that person responds to the event. It gives you a clue to the wavelength they operate on and how you might establish rapport."

Of course, not every contact is successful, even for a networking pro like Topus. "I need people inside the corporate realm," he says, "so a schoolteacher isn't going to do me much good. On my last flight I was seated beside an older woman returning from a funeral...but I gave a shot to the gal across the aisle. You always start in at the closest proximity and work out as circumstances dictate." Like everything else in sales, midair networking is a bit of a numbers game, but here's the number Dave Topus finds most important: "It only takes one conversation to turn a stranger into a contact." – KIM WRIGHT WILEY

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