Science & Technology

The New Rules of Networking

In today's economy, you need to use all the tools technology offers to build your professional network, strengthen your Columbia connections, and advance your career. Sree Sreenivasan '93JRN, one of the foremost experts on the use (and abuse) of social media, shows you how it's done.

By
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Davide Bonazzi

This spring, as Columbia’s 261st academic year draws to a close, almost eight thousand students are packing up their books and polishing their résumés. Most of the Class of 2015 will be looking to launch their careers; others will have earned an advanced degree that will further their established professions. Almost all will enter

a volatile and competitive job market alongside 2.8 million other ambitious graduates. Will a degree from an Ivy League university give our graduates an edge? Absolutely. But according to social-media guru Sree Sreenivasan ’93JRN, Columbia graduates will also benefit from a vast network of alumni connections that could have enormous value for the rest of their lives.

Sreenivasan, a former faculty member of the Graduate School of Journalism who is now chief digital officer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has spent more than twenty years studying and speaking about the promise of digital and social media, the power of connectivity, and the value of networking. He is still actively involved in the Columbia community, and as a self-described “digital evangelist,” he says everyone should learn how to use social media to advance his or her career and build a professional network for the long term.

In May, as the Commencement bleachers were being assembled on Low Plaza and students were collecting phone numbers and e-mail addresses from their classmates, *Columbia Magazine* asked Sreenivasan to download some of his wisdom.

You’re an expert on navigating not only the promise of social media, but its pitfalls. Do you have specific ideas on how we should use social media in our professional lives?

There are so many opportunities for us to connect with folks who can help us with our careers. It’s unfortunate that people don’t try them all, or even know about them. In my twenty years of working with both students and more established professionals, I’ve seen networking evolve. But not everyone has evolved with it. To really capitalize on the new tools and new opportunities available online, you have to understand the technology and use it — not just in your professional life but in your personal life. Basically, you have to be networking all the time. I don’t think there’s any difference between in-person and digital networking. It’s all just networking. It may not be instinctual, but it can be taught.

What are some of the ways that social media has improved the way people network professionally?

For years, the only way to reach out to people was when you wanted something. You wouldn’t write a note to a mentor or a prospective employer just to say, “Hi. I’m

thinking of you.” You had to ask for something. Now social media allows you to have what I call “low-touch networking.” By liking a photo on Facebook, retweeting an item on Twitter, or following a company on LinkedIn, you’re not making any requests or demands. People in positions of power are always being asked for something — a job, a speech, a foreword for a book. Low-touch networking is a very gentle way of connecting. You’re basically saying, “I notice you. You’re great.” That’s all, and that’s completely OK. Don’t wait until you need something from somebody to make a connection. I say to people, “Don’t be an ‘ask’ on social media.” There’s a *k* in there, but if they mishear me and don’t hear the *k*, that’s OK, because you don’t want to be the other thing on social media either.

So is there a misperception that you only need to network when you're looking for a job?

Oh, yeah. The best career management is to build your networks when you don’t need them so they’re there when you do. Right now you should be using social media to show that you can be helpful, informative, relevant, credible, even entertaining. Get comfortable with LinkedIn and its etiquette, style, and language. I tell people that it’s too late to figure out LinkedIn when your company has layoffs. You’ll just come across as desperate, and desperation does not work in any social situation, whether it’s LinkedIn or JDate or eHarmony or Match.com. You don’t want to be desperate. You want to be confident — someone people want to talk to, not avoid.

Should we focus on networking with people who are in senior positions, or is that a mistake?

You should connect with people at all levels. In fact, people who are just starting out can be very helpful to you. They have access, and might be more willing to show you how to navigate a particular company or profession. At Columbia I used to tell my peers, “Be nice to your students, because you’re going to work for them one day.” You often find that the most helpful people are not the presidents of companies.

Sree Sreenivasan (Deidre Schoo)

What kinds of things do people get wrong with social media?

In 2015, there's absolutely no reason you shouldn't have a recent, recognizable photo of yourself on LinkedIn. Not you as a child, not you *with* a child, not *of* your child, but a recent, recognizable photo. I go to so many conferences where I meet people I know on Twitter, and they have a photo from twenty years ago, and they don't look anything like themselves.

How about e-mail etiquette?

I'd say that while everyone is always talking about social media and mobile media, e-mail still makes the world go round. Make sure you are a good, clear communicator on e-mail. If you're wishy-washy or have poor spelling, grammar, or

punctuation, those things are going to come back to bite you. I would also say that in a world of so much e-mail, one of the ways to stand out when you're networking is to send a handwritten thank-you note after you meet someone. I also have an etiquette rule: never call anybody to ask for help without e-mailing them first. You never know if someone has had a bad morning, or if his or her kid has a fever. If they're active on social media, you could check their social-media posts before you make that call and get a clue to how they're feeling: for the first time in history, people are signaling what they're feeling publicly.

Is it ever OK to ignore someone's LinkedIn request?

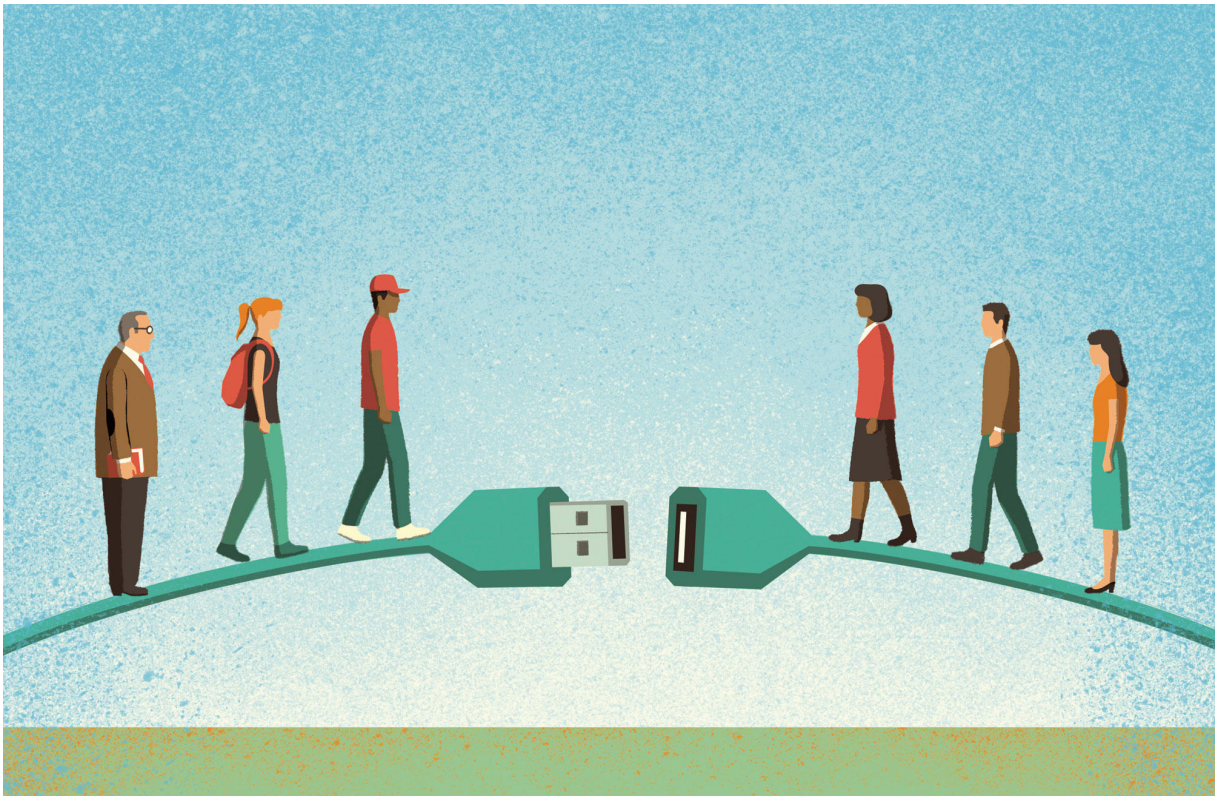
My own policy on LinkedIn is to say yes to people who I already know, who I'd like to know, and who I should know. That may sound overly open, but it's sort of what you already do in real life. If you're at a cocktail party and someone approaches you, you're not going to say, "Oh my God, stay away." The fact that you're at the same cocktail party gives you the sense that maybe this person is worth saying hello to.

Is face-to-face networking still important?

A hundred percent. That's why events and conferences count.

Where do you stand on the value of Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest for professional networking? Should we keep the personal and professional separated?

It's very subjective, and there are no rules. Be on the network that makes the most sense to you and that fits into your life. And then get comfortable. It's very hard to separate your personal and professional life, though. Some people say, "Well, Facebook is for personal and LinkedIn is for professional." But what do you do when your best client asks to be your friend on Facebook? Are you going to say "no, thanks"? No. But you should actively manage your Facebook page. Facebook has great privacy features, and you can put people in different lists so they can't see as much of your stuff.



Davide Bonazzi

You have more than 200,000 followers on your personal Facebook page. But you also have a second Facebook page called SreeTips, where you regularly post digital-job leads. Is this a way of giving something back?

It’s a tough economy, and people need help. You want to give people a sense of all the opportunities out there, and that’s why I do it. And I get nice notes from people telling me when they’ve applied for a job. I’m really humbled when that happens. If we can all help each other, there’s nothing better.

You're well known in the Columbia community for throwing parties at your apartment where you encourage guests to make connections. Tell us more.

I think it’s wrong to gather people together and not introduce them to each other. My wife and I have an annual holiday open house where we invite about three hundred people to stop by between the hours of 4:00 and 11:00 p.m. In the course of the evening, we stop the party four times and have everybody introduce themselves. People can’t believe it; they’ve never seen anything like it. People are shocked, and sometimes they’re put on the spot, but they make great connections.

You got your master's degree in journalism at Columbia, then spent twenty years teaching at the journalism school and a year as the University's chief digital officer before you took your current job at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Can you speak to the power of your Columbia network?

I arrived at twenty-one and left at forty-three, so I've been completely shaped by my Columbia experience. Even though I'm no longer a member of the full-time faculty, I'm super excited to help in any way I can. I think all alumni should get involved, go back for reunions, sign up for the newsletters, join the LinkedIn groups, and so on. People who don't use the networks are making a mistake. Everything I've gotten is from having Columbia connections, and I'm forever grateful for it.

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