

How To Network Your Way To Your Next Board Appointment

BY ROBYN HENDERSON CSP

It's not what you know—it's who knows what you know!

Why do we continue to see the same names popping up on boards throughout Australia and New Zealand? What do these people know, that the people wanting to secure board seats don't know? Is there a shortage of opportunities? Well, you only have to read the financial pages to see the highs and lows of board members and chairmen alike. One thing for certain is that you have to be visible, a strong decision maker, be prepared to make the tough calls and undergo public scrutiny.

So have you got what it takes to get on a board? Lets look at three key areas that may assist you to secure your first or next board appointment.

1. Be Prepared To Ask For Help

Identify all the people in your network who are currently on boards or have held board seats in the last five years. Highlight the names of those people you would feel comfortable phoning and asking for a ten-minute phone meeting. Now might be thinking you would prefer to take that busy person to lunch or dinner, and chat in a more relaxed manner. Maybe you give your contact that choice. But I can assure you it is no fun for the person being questioned as they try to eat a meal whilst being on the end of a barrage of questions. More often than not, their food goes cold, and it's not exactly a pleasant experience for them. And in this time poor society, you are probably not a major priority for them and let's face it; they can buy their own lunch any day. Yet asked courteously they will be more than happy to give you phone time. Your call might go something like this: "Mary, I am keen to get on a not-for-profit board in the charity area; I know you have been on XX board for sometime, and I was wondering if I could arrange a phone appointment with you to ask you three quick questions."

When your objectives are clearly explained, often you will receive your answers on the spot—which saves both of you time. However, if the appointment is confirmed, don't be surprised if it may be cancelled once or twice. Remember this is a priority for you, not for them.

2. Do Your Homework Before Your Phone Appointment

Be courteous enough to know as much about this person as possible. Know which boards they are currently on, the ones they may have resigned from and any challenges within the industries they currently represent. It could be considered a serious waste of their time if you have not bothered to research and prepare for the call. And this may reflect badly in the future, should they ever be asked to give you a reference or testimonial. Don't waste their time with stupid and obvious questions.

3. Be Specific With Your Questioning

Prepare your questions as succinctly as possible. Write them down and refer to the list as you go. Write notes, don't think you will remember everything—particularly if you are a little nervous—you are bound to forget something important.

Be direct, but avoid confrontation. Remember, they are helping you and giving freely of their time. Your questions may include a brief background summary. With their agreement, you may even pre-send a brief resume and your questions a couple of days before the phone meeting. The busy person may not read your information word for word, but they are generally impressed with your professionalism.

Your questions may include:

- How did you get your first board appointment?
- My situation is this: I am experienced in these areas; I am keen to get on boards in the YYY area; what should I be doing to increase my chances of being considered for a board?
- I have set a target of obtaining XX board appointments in the next XX years; is there anyone else you would recommend that I speak to, that may be able to offer a different perspective? And may I mention your name when I make contact with them?
- What have you found to be the biggest obstacles to getting onto boards?
- Is there a downside to being on a board?
- Other than a financial gain, what specific benefits have you experienced?
- If you were I, what would you do in the next 6–12 months to increase my chances?
- Final question—I am very grateful for your time, is there anything at all, in any area of your life that I could possibly help you with today? (Don't be surprised how simple a request you might receive at this time.)

Be mindful of the time you have asked for—ten minutes—it is not your call to extend the time unless this is offered to you. Always, always, always send a thank-you note; thanking the person for their time and making reference to one or two points that you will be acting on. Remember also to keep them in the loop with your progress—this doesn't mean weekly calls, but it does include a quarterly update, either written or posted.

A wise person once said that your Network is your Network—this certainly applies when it comes to board appointments.

Happy networking!

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