Networking: It's not just for "operators"

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This is my profound revelation as I prepared for this session:

> Science is a conversation --- the best networking is inspired by a true interest in joining that conversation. This means that networking isn't an isolated activity, separate from your other work. It should be integrated into your other scholarly activities. To be successfully, you need to have a short, articulate way of describing your work. You have to have an informed opinion on how your work contributes to the large conversation.

I thought this was a major insight, unique to me, until I found this very useful article by Phil Agre "Networking on the Network: A guide to professional skills for PhD students" http://vlsicad.ucsd.edu/Research/Advice/network.html#section1

> Many people resist the idea of networking because they associate it with "playing the career game", "knowing the right people", "kissing up to the powerful", "cynicism", or "politics", or because networking supposedly takes time away from "getting real work done". Some people grew up being told the dangerous half-truth that "if you do good work then you will be rewarded", as if rewards magically appear whether anybody knows about your good work or not. Others are allergic to the Machiavellian overtones of "How to Win Friends and Influence People". Indeed, people will accuse you of all sorts of terrible things if you admit to having worked-out ideas about networking. Many people, watching the real networking experts in action, assume that they must know some dark, inaccessible secrets that make it all easy (they don't). This is all terribly unfortunate, not least because it helps to stratify the world of research: ***networking is about community, not hierarchy, and people who don't learn to network are less likely to succeed. Agre, 2002.***

Networking at a conference is not a race to collect business cards or email addresses. When you approach famous people, either in person or in digital correspondence, approach them as a colleague based on your shared research interests. Conferences are a great way to start meeting those people. Do your homework so that the topic of your discussion should be based on the work that you have in common. Again, Agre offers the perfect template to start this conversation:

> I'm interested in ***[elements you have in common]*** and to this end, I am studying ***[elements you don't have in common with them].*** "I'm doing ethnographic research on people adopting computers and my field work concerns grade school teachers"

This statement is also known in the marketing world as an "elevator speech". Truthfully, you need several versions: one for an expert in your specific research topic, one for other scientist within the larger discipline, and one for your mom to explain what you are working on to the neighbors. Once you have greeted the person and attracted their attention, ask a thoughtful question. Some examples: I read your paper in XYZ journal and I wondered about ***[this part]*** of the results. Or, I am having trouble getting XYZ assay to work for my thesis project. What kind of kits does your lab use? Or, my favorite, I am presenting a poster tomorrow at 1 pm from a project that developed from your work. Would you stop by and have a look? I'd really like your opinion on the results. It is poster number XXX.

Successful people are busy, but many of them like to mentor junior colleagues. Be gently persistent and make simple requests. Example: Here is an abstract from the primary paper from my dissertation/master's thesis. Where would be a good place to submit this paper? (see Networking on the network for many other suggestions about how to initiate such a conversation).

Shameless self promotion (the gentle way) avoiding "aggressive empire building"

Request reprints from experts and mention the topic of your dissertation as the reason for your interest. They might write back to ask a question. Most often they forward your message to their administrative assistant.

If you receive a request for a reprint of one of your published papers, research the background of the person who asked for the reprint. Before replying: find out whether they are working in the same area. Will they send you pdfs of their papers that you are interested in? (ask for specific papers, not every paper they have written). It is useful to mention that you are a student and who your advisor is because people will often take time for students.

Join an important society in your field and focus your attention on that one: go to the meeting, try to find a way to join a committee. Many scientific societies are trying to find ways to engage the next generation of scientists. They want student involvement.

Again, Agre eloquently explains the point of networking:

> "Research of all kinds depends critically on intensive and continually evolving communication among people engaged in related projects. Networking cannot substitute for good research, but good research cannot substitute for networking either. You can't get a job or a grant or any recognition for your accomplishments unless you keep up to date with the people in your community. Establishing professional relationships with particular people and involving yourself in particular professional communities will change you: not only will you internalize a variety of interesting points of view, but you will become more comfortable in your writing and speaking because you will be engaged in an ongoing conversation with people you know."

Agre offers 5 steps:

1. Know your goals. A postdoc position? Being invited to give a talk? Developing leadership skills? Your goals will determine your strategy.
2. Identify some relevant people
3. Court these people individually
4. Meet this person face to face at a meeting
    a. For very senior people, one chat per year is plenty, unless you are asking for specific help with your project
5. Find a common project to work on: Agree suggests exchanging drafts of papers in progress
    a. One caveat: ideas are valuable. Be cautious about oversharing to avoid getting your ideas stolen.