

Networking rules for securing a board seat

‘Fish where the fish are’ and other tips for landing that board opportunity.

BY JILL GRIFFIN

Ed. Note: In her new book, *Earn Your Seat on a Corporate Board*, Jill Griffin offers 10 rules for networking with board directors and influencers. In the following adaptation from the book, we present five of her rules, plus her “10 reasons why I relish my corporate board seat” (see sidebar on page 71). The book is published by Jill Griffin Books, copyright ©2016 by JJ Griffin Enterprises Inc. The author’s website is www.jillgriffin.net.

Networking is more than a fleeting conversation. It’s a series of interactions. These connections are vital to helping you search out board opportunities. Moreover, when companies hone in on one or two candidates, they’ll do reference checks among people they know and trust. As a result, it’s critical to continuously expand and enrich your network and get to know people who can vouch for you.

Fish Where the Fish Are: Landing a board seat is both a numbers game and a contacts game. Network

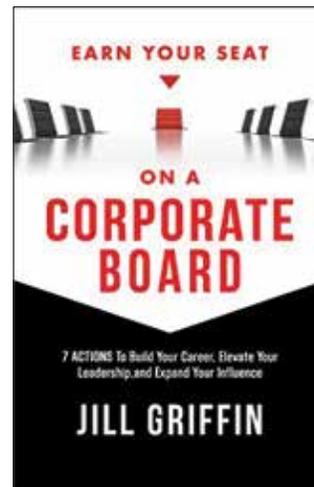
in organizations that have members who are corporate board directors and board seat influencers. But don’t stop there! Let your bank, law, public accounting, and consulting firm contacts know of your interest in being on a board and the value you would bring. If you are involved in charities, nonprofit organizations, or cultural organizations, those can also be great sources of high-level contacts.

Think Function, Not Just Title: Next time you sit at an event table and find an administrative assistant seated next to you, *rejoice*. This person knows how to make things happen. She (sometimes it’s a he) knows processes and people within her company that her CEO is likely clueless about. Fate has likely dealt you a great card here. Make the connection, explore her interests, and

if your instincts say so, nurture the unique new friendship.

Ask a Barbara Walters Warm-Up

Question: One of the best at the art of conversation is Barbara Walters. The depth and breadth of her interviews spanning five decades is legendary. A “get to know you” question she recommends is simply, “What was your first job?” Barbara says it’s an easy question for anyone to answer, and the “Tell me more about that” follow-up query always brings interesting insights to the surface.



Say “Yes” Thoughtfully, Perform Fully: If a contact asks you for a favor, think carefully before saying “yes.” By saying yes, you are obligating your time and efforts to deliver. You may need to state some caveats on exactly what you can deliver. Remember, your word is your bond.

As you become better networked, opportunities will come your way for which you know you are not the best choice. Use these times to show your team player chops. Offer up names that are better fits and offer to make the connections. I practice this with my consulting colleagues. They always appreciate it and more than return the favor.

Your network is comprised of a lot of mini-networks among whom word travels fast and furious. Your good

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name and reputation are priceless. Every yes (and no) is a “handle with care” situation.

Ask Cautiously: When a need surfaces that requires a favor from a contact in your network, proceed with care. Frame your ask in a way that honors your contact and his or her insight and advice. This is particularly important in asking for help on getting seated on a corporate board. The less tactful approach is to ask directly: “Do you know any corporate boards seeking new directors?” This approach feels harsh since it seems to put your contact directly on the spot.

A better tact is to take “the ask” in a different direction. Bring your research on board fit to the conversation. It shows you’ve done your research. Share which business sectors you believe are suitable and the possible boards in that sector that may prize your skill sets. Conclude with a soft close, such as “This is the type of company I think I could add value to. Do you think I’m on the right track?” After they offer their feedback, say: “Thank you for that insight. Please

keep me in mind.”

Now, if your contact offers to reach out on your behalf to a specific board,

great! But by not asking directly, and instead asking for guidance and advice, you’ve gingerly planted the seed about your interest in board service. And you’ve allowed the individual to remain comfortable and shown that you value his or her advice. ■

Why I relish my corporate board seat

Over the course of my 30-year business career, I’ve been blessed with a host of “highs.” In looking back, the pinnacle experience has been (and still is) the opportunity to serve as an independent director of an NYSE small-cap company, Luby’s/Fuddrucker’s Inc. (ticker symbol LUB).

Here are 10 reasons why I relish my corporate board seat:

1. What I learn in a year of board meetings is equivalent to “renewing” my MBA.
2. I get to contribute to corporate strategy at its highest level of complexity.
3. I’ve been part of a board that has guided two beloved restaurant brands, on the brink of demise, back to financial health.
4. I’ve stood shoulder to shoulder with my fellow board members, and our shareholders, to win a hard-fought proxy fight with a hedge fund.
5. I’ve come to appreciate each of our business units’ unique corporate cultures.

6. I’m blessed to work alongside principled and accomplished directors from whom I’m always learning.
7. I’ve come to be comfortable with “productive conflict” even when I’m the sole voice on an issue.
8. I’ve become a better listener and more open-minded to differing perspectives.
9. I’ve learned that my job as a board director is to coach and mentor the executive team. At the end of the day, they run the company.
10. I’ve come to truly prize the individualized passion, wisdom, and wit of my fellow board directors, as well as to deeply appreciate how our skill sets and idiosyncrasies unite us and keep us strong.

Fact is, serving on a corporate board has made me a better businesswoman and has matured me as a human being. I want the same for you.

— Jill Griffin

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