How to tap your existing network and expand it even further

We know networking can be awkward, but here's why it simply has to be done: Available host family names aren't posted in the classifieds. Indeed, everyone I spoke with agrees that nothing beats good, old-fashioned networking. By that we mean tapping into relatives, friends and former colleagues, and calling up any referrals they might offer.

Keep these 10 tips in mind to make your networking efforts as fruitful as possible.

1. **Write an Elevator Speech**

   Before you start networking, prepare what experts call an elevator speech. This should be a summary of what you want people to know about YFU USA that can be delivered in less than 30 seconds. Think of it as a marketing message: who we are, what we do and what we are looking for. The key is to keep it upbeat, succinct and to the point. Since you only get one opportunity to make a first impression, I recommends first practicing your elevator speech in front of a mirror and then on friends.

2. **Use Your Existing Network**

   The best way to start networking is to tap into your existing circle of contacts, including friends, family members and former colleagues. "Everyone has a center of influence and people that they touch. This is where the best opportunities come from...from somebody who knows somebody."

3. **Show Interest in Others**

   The secret to effective networking is to stop focusing on you and take an interest in the other person. Not sure how to do this? Simply start asking questions and get that new contact to talk about himself, people love to talk about themselves. And they're often flattered when others seem genuinely interested in what they have to say.

4. **Don't Ask for a Host Family Name**

   This may sound counterintuitive, but the worst thing you can do while networking is ask for a host family name. Instead, seek advice. Why? People are more likely to be generous with their time when you ask for their counsel. Also, if you ask for a host family name you're often forcing the other person to say no to you. Or, if that contact doesn't know of a family, you are giving him an excuse not to meet with you.

5. **Build Relationships**

   Strangers aren't going to put their reputations on the line for you. That's why you have to take the time to build a relationship with any new person you meet before asking for a favor. How do you do that? Consider dropping a personalized note to any new contact you meet. The key is to nurture the contact until you feel you've secured that person's attention.

6. **Don't Be Selfish**

   No matter how desperate you are, remember that networking is a two-way street. After every meeting, ask if there's anything you can do to help the other person.

7. **Always Follow Through**

   Nothing can kill a relationship faster than not writing a proper thank-you note. In many cases you can e-mail it, but don't assume the content of that letter is any less important than if you sent it by snail mail. A three line message with a smiley face doesn't cut it. Equally wrong is failing to keep the other person abreast of how your meeting went with someone he or she referred you to. *And don't even think about not making contact with someone who was referred to you*. It's just rude. Chances are your contact went out of his way to call that person and mentioned that you're looking for some advice.

8. **Never Abuse Relationships**

   Be careful not to overuse your network. Unfortunately, there's no rule here for how many phone calls are too many. Just try to gauge if you're coming across as someone who's always looking for a favor. Try to keep the relationship as mutually beneficial as possible.

9. **Maintain Your Network**

   You've heard it before, but it's worth repeating: Maintain your network even when you aren't looking for a host family. It will make it that much easier to tap into when you do need a little assistance. It could also open up doors when you least expect it.

10. **Reach Out When You Don’t Need Help**

    From time to time all of us let a few people slip from our network. We get busy and lose touch. The best time to reach out and reconnect is when you aren't looking for a host family. Chances are that former contact will be delighted to hear from you — especially if you aren't looking for a favor.