



## Creating Meaningful Business Connections

*Leopards are not the same thing as leopard coats.*

*By Jean Van Rensselar*

Ripley-esque weird and wonderful things happen when you let go of self-interest – more business, more money, less stress, etc. They happen when you stop seeing people in terms of how they can serve you and start appreciating them as, well... other humans. This isn't a nugget from an Eastern temple – it's just sound business advice.

For instance, some people look at leopards and only see fur coats: *I'm the one that should be wearing that coat.* Continuing along this line, some people look at store clerks and only see cash register operators. Some people look at coworkers and only see competitors. Some people look at customers and prospects and only see money.

Actually, it's not just *some people* – it's all of us. To some degree, we all look at the world in terms of how it can serve us. It becomes a problem when it's how we live our lives, when it's how we do business. It makes others feel uncomfortable and even unsafe.

### Genuine Interest

Think about the people in your life who are genuinely interested in you: your parents, your siblings, a significant other, aunts and uncles, long-term friends...

What do these people all have in common?

- You trust them.
- You feel comfortable around them.
- You feel safe around them.

Why? Because you know whatever advice they give you and whatever they ask you to do, they have your best interest at heart. These aren't people that you met once or twice; these are people that share a long history with you.

Then there are other people such as your doctor, your dentist, your pet's veterinarian, your child's piano teacher, your personal trainer, your dry cleaner, etc. These are people you don't know as well as the first group, but people you probably trust. Why? Because you've known them for a while and consider them professional friends.

Another difference between the first group and the second group is that they are, in one way or another, making money off you in exchange for services you find *beneficial*.

If your personal trainer dropped by your office one day to see if you were free for lunch, you'd probably go. Now imagine for a second that your personal trainer stopped working at the gym and got a sales job with a home-gym distributor. Next thing you know, you're getting exercise equipment brochures in the mail and your former trainer calls you at work to see if you're free for lunch. Would you go?

When you have business interactions with people, they run it through this filter: *Is this person considering my interests or does he see me just in terms of what I can do for him?*

A good self-interest barometer is eye contact. Regardless of motives, people can always make eye contact, but they can't fake the quality of the eye contact. When you look someone in the eye, what do their eyes say, *I want to work with you* or *I want to dominate you*.

I had the experience of sitting across the desk from a prospect who asked me thoughtful questions, then challenged me on many answers. When I finished explaining, he would stare silently and aggressively for several seconds until I looked away. After a few rounds of this, I dropped the gauntlet and we stared at each other in silence until someone finally broke in.

*Lesson: You can't work effectively with anyone who is self-interested and dominating* – better to find this out sooner than later.

Networking events don't have to be superficial and stressful. If you attend with the attitude of connecting with people that you can help, you'll probably have a good time. Avoid people that you observe lighting on one person after another. Instead, find people who have been standing alone for minute or two and are likely to welcome a substantive conversation.

Ironically, I've found that the most valuable business relationships I have are with people I met in some non-business setting – people that I just got to know who had a friend that needed my services.

I have an acquaintance that's the friendliest person I know. He talks to everyone - whether he's standing in line at the drugstore, on a commuter train, or in the car dealer's waiting room. He's interested in everyone. And he's met some amazing people – just last week he met a professional ballet dancer on an airplane, discovered that she couldn't find an affordable apartment, and gave her the number of someone who could help her.

People look at him and say that he's the luckiest person in the world – business just seems to fall in his lap, but those of us who know him well, realize that's not the case. People are willing to do anything for him, because they know he would do (and does) the same for them.

### Becoming Genuinely Interested

It's not easy to change the way we see people. You can't teach someone to become less self-interested, but often when people grasp the consequences of their self-interest, they change on their own.

If you fully understood how aggravated a customer was after purchasing more from you than he really needed; or how much grief your inferior customer service costs people, you might do things differently – not just because that person won't do business with you again, but because you feel the pain.

Self-interest is short-term interest, which is why it seems to work. In the short-term, you can profit by selling something to someone that they don't need. In the long-term, they'll shop somewhere else. In the short-term, you can take 2 days to respond to an emailed service request, in the long term, that customer is going to tell a few people who won't buy from you – but then how would you know?

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There's a continuum of self-interested behavior. At one extreme, there are doormats who are perpetually resentful at being taken advantage of and at the other extreme, there are psychologically disturbed people who fail to grasp the fact that other people have needs different than their own. These people are actually very dangerous. But even people who *tend* toward that extreme are threatening, which is why aggressive salespeople make us uncomfortable.

Somewhere in the center, there's the spot where we satisfy our needs only by helping other people satisfy theirs – where we become successful only by making other people successful – where we can appreciate the magnificence of a leopard without sizing up its coat.

### By the Way...

For those of us who are unapologetic introverts, forming friendships is a little more work. I've discovered that there's value in just showing up for social gatherings – even if you aren't the most scintillating conversationalist in the room. People will get to know you gradually – a sure way to develop deep friendships. Quizzically, people at social gatherings are often drawn to introverts – much like cats gravitate to non cat-lovers.

### About the Author

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