



# BUSINESS INSIDER

## A master networker shares his top 20 networking tips



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At one of Jon Levy's house parties you could find yourself, as we recently did, making fajitas with Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter Regina Spektor and leading snake venom expert Zoltan Takacs before watching live presentations from Bill Nye the Science Guy and break-dancing pioneer Richard "Crazy Legs" Colón.

Levy may not be a Wall Street billionaire or hotshot advertising executive, but over the past five years, [he's built the "Influencers,"](#) a network of over 400 interesting and impressive people that includes everyone from Nobel laureates to Olympic athletes.



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Influencers founder Jon Levy gives a toast.

Twice a month, Levy holds private dinner parties and TED Talk-like "Salons" in the sprawling New York City apartment he inherited from his parents, who are successful artists now living in Israel. As an independent marketing consultant specializing in consumer behavior, a diverse, strong network is beneficial to his career. But beyond that, Levy has a genuine passion for connecting influential people from different fields and seeing what these relationships yield.

We asked Levy to share some of the tactics he used to go from a low-profile New Yorker to the leader of a growing network of power players. Here are his top networking tips.



## 1. Appreciate that the most influential people operate on a different level.

A seminar on personal success several years ago inspired Levy to start a network that became the Influencers. He says he left thinking about this quote: "The fundamental element that defines the quality of your life is the people you surround yourself with and the conversations you have with them."

If you want to surround yourself with executives and successful entrepreneurs, you first need to understand and respect that the lives of high-demand people are fundamentally different from even most chronically busy people, Levy says. Their schedules are likely filled with travel plans and meetings, with scarce free time dedicated to family.

"Everybody's coming to them for answers. Everybody's asking them the same questions millions of times. You can begin to think about, 'OK, what is something different that I could provide this person that would make it worth their time to speak with me or meet with me?'" Levy says.

## 2. Add value without expecting anything.

On that note, you should be thinking of how you can add value to a potential connection without expecting anything in return, at least immediately. Levy is a proponent of Wharton professor, [bestselling author](#), and Influencers member Adam Grant's theory on "givers," those who seek out opportunities to help people they respect and appreciate.

"If you're a giver, then you build quality relationships, and with those relationships you're exposed to opportunity over the long term," [Grant told Business Insider](#) last year. "You actually increase your own luck so far as you contribute things to other people."



*Business Insider*

Wharton professor Adam Grant is the author of "Give and Take."

### 3. Create memories.

Rahzel, former member of The Roots and beatboxing legend, joined the Influencers over a year ago and says that he's amazed by Levy's memory. "Jon can pinpoint people and the places and exact time he met them," he says.

Levy says he's boosted his memory with a simple trick. "For the most part our memory is visual, and it works based on novelty for something to really stick out," he says. "If there's somebody I meet that I really want to connect with, I try to create a moment that's memorable and that can serve as tradition."

This can mean sharing a special toast or asking a question that will elicit a unique response. For example, Levy met a Tinder exec recently and asked her about the first thing most people ask her. She said men who use the dating app often nervously ask if Tinder employees can read guys' messages to other users. "Now I'll never forget her!" he says.



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Levy introduces legendary beatboxer Rahzel.

### 4. Make your introductions more interesting.

Most people just aren't interesting in the way they communicate, Levy says. He thinks that Americans, especially, apply their efficient approach at work to how they meet people, talking in boring, direct ways about themselves.

"When people ask me what I do, I try to be a little elusive just to create some interest. So I tell people I spend most of my life trying to convince people to cook me dinner. Which is true," he says, laughing. "A lot of my time is really spent around logistics, phone calls, and emails and all that. But the benefit of [my introduction] is that it sounds so different and then it's much easier to connect."

You may be better off delaying the job-talk for as long as possible. Levy has his dinner guests spend the majority of the evening refraining from discussing any aspect of their occupation, and encourages Salon guests to do the same, so that they can get to know each other personally.



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Levy snaps a photo of Bill Nye and guests.

New Yorker writer and author Maria Konnikova found this endearing when she attended one of Levy's dinners and Salons. "At the Salon, you're just enjoying the evening and figuring out which people you actually like, regardless of whether they can be helpful to you," she says.





## 5. Use the double opt-in system to introduce people to each other.

In keeping with being a "giver," you should always be aware of which of your connections could be interested in meeting each other, and email is the easiest way to do so remotely.

Levy is comfortable connecting his closest friends through an email addressed to both of them, but he'll use what Grant calls the ["double opt-in" system](#) for the busiest people in his network. If there's a chance that the busier connection simply doesn't have the time or desire to speak with the other person, a private email to both parties asking if they'd like to connect allows you to screen refusals without hurting anyone's feelings.

And, as Grant explains in an ["Art of Charm" podcast](#), you should introduce people because you think they can add value to each other, not just because they happen to live in the same city.

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## 6. Befriend gatekeepers.

You'll find that many of the world's busiest people have assistants taking care of their emails, phone calls, and schedules. If that's the case, it's in your best interest to be on cordial terms with them if you're looking to connect with their boss.

"If you can make friends with [the gatekeepers], you will be on their schedule," Levy says.

He says that once he's met someone in person and gotten their personal contact information, he'll first try them directly the next time he wants to reach out. And if they don't respond, he'll try again with their assistant looped in.

"There's no ego involved," he says. Don't feel slighted if you have to go through an assistant even after you've met someone. Whatever works for their schedule will work for you.

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## 7. Make cold calls.

To get in touch with influential people, you can't be afraid of reaching out without precedent.

Levy recommends getting in touch with an executive sometime before 8 a.m. because it's likely that they're in their office but that their assistant isn't. If you're able to get access to their number, give them a call before their day becomes too hectic. There are databases like [Who Represents](#) that you can subscribe to that include the contact information of high-demand people and their gatekeepers.

And if you don't want to use a database, you can try a free trick that Levy uses. Get just a single person's email address from the company your target works for to determine the format (e.g. my email is rfeloni@businessinsider.com, so it makes sense that my colleague Shana Lebowitz's email is slebowitz@businessinsider.com). This sneaky tactic is actually how Levy recently got in touch with a Sony senior vice president.

Make sure, however, that if you're reaching out you've actually got something of genuine value to share, as mentioned above.

## 8. Write emails that will get replies.

Sending an introductory email to someone is low risk because the worst-case scenario is that your message gets tossed and your name forgotten. But you can significantly increase the chance that your email will get a reply if you follow these tips, Levy says:

- **Don't be a salesman.** "I don't try to convince them of anything in my message," Levy says. "It's not, 'Oh, I think it would be really good to do this because of X, Y, and Z.' [It's] 'This is what I do ... I think what you're doing is fascinating, and I'd like to sit down with you and talk about what you're up to.'"

- **Keep it as short as possible.** You'll want to have the recipient take a look at your message and be able to give an adequate response, even if it takes them 30 seconds on their smartphone. When Levy emails a high-demand person like a celebrity, he keeps his email down to a single sentence that cuts out any trace of filler. If he emails an executive, who make decisions based on available information, he'll limit his message to three to five sentences and include some links they can click if they'd like to learn more about him and the Influencers.

- **Offer a clear next step.** If your recipient is interested in you, let them know how you'd like to take things forward by asking a question or extending an invite they can email reply to.

- **Entice them with your subject lines.** If you're being referred by someone in their inner circle, mention their name in the subject. Levy likes the subject line "Quick Question" because it signals to the reader that they can open the email and remain on a path to a cleaner inbox.



@TomHanks/Twitter

Maybe Tom Hanks won't reply to your email. But you won't make high profile connections if you're not both tactful and confident.

## 9. Follow up.

Be sure to send a quick follow-up email either later in the day or the next day after meeting someone for coffee or lunch. It's proper etiquette that will keep you from looking like you're selfishly using the other person.

## 10. Organize your contacts.

If you're looking to build a network on the scale of Levy's, you could benefit from some simple organization.

Levy uses Google docs like a traditional phone book, but with contacts arranged by industry and ranked by the likelihood that they'll do business together. He keeps separate lists for those in his Influencers community, potential members he's reached out to, and those he's interested in eventually connecting with.

## 11. Create a diverse network of givers.

Who should you be adding to your network in the first place? Generous people from a wide variety of industries, Levy says. Prioritize personality over perceived "usefulness."

"It's [adding diversity to your network that truly helps it](#). The reason is, every time you add an additional person that's in your industry, you're not expanding your network very much because you all probably know the same people," he says.

For example, Levy became friends with the founder of Wizard World Comicon, Gareb Shamus, someone completely unrelated to Levy's industry. "Nobody would think that investing in that relationship makes any sense! He's a wonderful guy, and one of the most generous people I've had the pleasure to know," he says.



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Levy's parties will often include a fun variety of academic talks and entertainment, like breakdancing pioneer Crazy Legs giving a demo.

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## 12. Stay away from drama.

"I'm in full support of providing value and helping people who are struggling, but I fundamentally will not allow my network to be exposed to people who are negative and have the potential to bring them down. It's insidious, and it spreads through the network very quickly," Levy says.

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### 13. Don't be afraid of making a fool of yourself.

If you're serious about making a name for yourself, you'll need to be willing to embarrass yourself in front of powerful people.

Speaking about himself, Levy says, "I think the only people who would probably embarrass themselves more over time are people who are far, far, far more successful. Like the [Richard] Bransons of the world."

There are going to be times when you're not going to appear as funny or impressive as you'd like, but as with anything else, you should make note of how your social interactions failed and improve the next time.

Levy actually plays with the way he tells stories and introduces himself either in person or over email to see how people react, and then adjusts accordingly.



Paul Kane/Getty

Virgin Group chairman Richard Branson is no stranger to embarrassments both silly (and self-inflicted) and serious.

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### 14. Don't impose yourself on others.

"One of the fundamental mistakes I made at the beginning was thinking that people enjoyed all the things I liked," Levy says.

He would take an "older sibling" approach and try to get his introverted connections to behave like him, an extrovert. For example, if he tried to get a shy person to retell a story he enjoyed in front of a large crowd, he ended up putting that person into an incredibly uncomfortable situation.

Whether you're introducing people or hosting them at an event, you should always be aware that it's not your job to get people to behave a certain way.

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### 15. Understand that not everyone will like you, and that's OK.

"At a certain point, I realized that there's a percentage of the population that no matter what you do or say, they're just not going to like you, and it's beyond your control," Levy says.

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't work on yourself and develop yourself and learn to make people more comfortable, but at a certain point it's like, what are you trying to accomplish?"

If it turns out that a coworker or even a childhood hero of yours doesn't like your personality even when you're at your best, then simply move on and spend time with someone else.



## 16. Have a topic prepared to start a conversation.

Everyone's been in a situation where you're stuck with a stranger and neither of you has anything to say. So instead of talking about the weather or your commute, says Levy, "I always have a story of something I've been doing recently or a book that I've been reading."

"Otherwise I hate the 'interview' setting, which is what happens when it's like, 'So what do you do? I do this. What do you do?' That's sharing facts, not insights. It's not connecting," he says.

## 17. Tell a story that is clear and compelling.

When you tell a story, make sure it has a clear point and a punch line, whether it's a takeaway or a joke. You should strive to be memorable when you're meeting new people, and the best way to do so is through good storytelling.



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Bill Nye gives a presentation about global warming.

## 18. End conversations gracefully.

"I used to be absolutely awful, really awkward, at ending conversations," Levy says, laughing. "The last moments of a conversation will define how people remember you, so you want to get really good at a solid ending," instead of being rudely (or strangely) abrupt.

Over the phone, wait for a lull in the conversation and then give an indication that you need to be excused for something else or are happy with how the conversation went. Tell them it was a pleasure speaking with them and that you'll make sure to follow up on certain points.

In person, Levy says he always takes an extra beat to make eye contact with the person he's finished speaking with so that it doesn't seem as if he's running away.



## 19. Keep meetings brief.

There's no need to let an introductory meeting with a new connection last longer than 45 minutes, Levy says. And if you're grabbing coffee or lunch, the ideal is probably a half hour.

"It's better to leave the conversation having something to talk about and feeling like you need to connect again rather than feeling that the energy's died," Levy says.

## 20. Be open. People are ultimately unpredictable.

You can't be uptight if you're looking to become a great networker. Do what you can to connect with people who are interesting, and don't waste time with those who don't mesh with your personality.

"One of the fundamental issues that we face as people is we are acutely aware of the things we tell ourselves to be aware of and then are aware of virtually nothing else," Levy says. "So we tend to overvalue specific people or experiences. And when you realize the diversity of exceptional human beings out there and opportunities and business deals and everything, you're going to realize there are a lot more options than you're giving credit to."



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Levy says that the best thing to keep at the front of your mind is to be open to new types of people and to continue spending time with those who you like.