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## Talking a good game

### NEVER TOO LATE TO LEARN | Self-confidence, listening skills are key to networking

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BY SANDY THORN CLARK

Rickey Gold, Helena Bouchez and Jenni Prokopy have what they call their secret weapons of networking but, like most experienced and successful networkers, they are willing to share their secrets.

All three Chicago women emphasize the importance of genuineness, authenticity and honesty to networking -- the more-popular-than-ever practice of building up or maintaining informal relationships, especially with people whose friendship could bring business advantages. But initially, acting has some merit, says Gold, who teaches "Networking 101" for newcomers joining the Lincoln Park Chamber of Commerce.

"When you're horrified about meeting new people, act as if it doesn't bother you when you approach people -- all the time repeating to yourself, 'This too shall pass' and/or 'It's going to get easier.' And if you're not interested in what a person is saying, pretend you're interested until you can genuinely say, 'It was nice to talk with you' and move on."

The No. 1 rule of networking is that it's about sharing and giving, rather than taking, say the women, all of whom had to overcome initial fears of meeting strangers.

And that "giving rather than taking" applies to all forms of networking -- whether they be conventional face-to-face exchanges in networking, business or social gatherings or more modern e-mails, blogs, forums or Web casts -- say Gold, 55, owner of Rickey Gold & Associates, a marketing and communications business; Bouchez, 45, a musician, author and vice president of Hodge Schindler Integrated Communications, and Prokopy, 34, a free-lance writer, speaker and creator of *ChronicBabe.com*, an online community for younger women with health issues.

"I'm an e-mailer, so I shoot short e-mails to my network -- simply put, I water my garden a lot," explains Bouchez, who "hangs out" at *helenabouchez.blogspot.com*, *guitarnoise.com*, *talkbass.com*, *facebook.com*, *myspace.com* and *idea-xchange.com*. Bouchez, who calls networking "the power of loose connection," maintains a data base of people, segregated by industries.

Prokopy was diagnosed in 1997 with fibromyalgia and, soon after, asthma, anxiety, Raynaud's (a blood vessel disorder) and GERD. She overcomes the nervousness, sweaty palms and palpitating heart that can still accompany meeting strangers by repeating five words to herself: "I deserve to be here."

Prokopy also recommends online networking as a viable option: "It's the best of the best. You can network at midnight. You can do it in pajamas. It's much easier than having to stand in front of a complete stranger. You don't have to worry about eating a canape and having spinach stuck in your teeth.

"I don't think it can match being face-to-face, but it's a close approximation. You still have to be creative and reach out. Networking's about getting great ideas out there and offering support. To be successful, you have to come fully present with a generosity of spirit."

Gold stresses the importance of perfecting what networkers call "elevator" speeches (time-abbreviated capsules of what an individual does): "If it doesn't lead people to ask a question about your business, rework it until it does."

Because, after all, networking is about sharing, not secrets.

*Sandy Thorn Clark is a local free-lance writer.*