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## MANAGING YOUR CAREER

Overused Contacts  
Respond to Apologies,  
Rewards and Updates

By **JOANN S. LUBLIN**  
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL  
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Almost everyone celebrates the new year by making resolutions. One of yours may be to rejuvenate your stalled career by seeking additional help from the circle of friends, colleagues and acquaintances who can provide you with job leads, business introductions and professional advice.

But beware! You may be alienating important contacts -- who could shun your calls and bad-mouth you to others -- if you ask for too many favors too often without reciprocating.

It's possible to recover from network overuse. However, the process "takes place over time and is not an overnight cure," says Susan RoAne, a Greenbrae, Calif., author of books about networking.

The best first step: Apologize humbly. Tell an overcontacted contact, "I blew a relationship and I need that relationship," recommends Diane Darling, a fellow author and president of Effective Networking in Boston.

Express gratitude for the contact's generous past support, perhaps with a handwritten note tucked inside a belated New Year's card. Make sure your next request better matches that individual's capabilities. "Don't ask people for something so out of their realm that they feel uncomfortable and unable to respond," Ms. RoAne advises.

One jobless marketing executive keeps pestering Ms. Darling for telecom-sector introductions even though the networking specialist previously supplied her a handful of industry acquaintances. "Why turn to me again?" Ms. Darling asks.

The executive has also ignored the suggestion that she tap her Wharton network. Fed up, Ms. Darling avoids her entirely. Unless you heed contacts' counsel, they may refuse further referrals out of fear that you won't represent them well.

To soften your pesky, self-centered image, transform a networking bond into a two-way street. Offer favors, information or introductions tailored to an overused contact's needs.

Joey Robertson lost his job last June as a Sara Lee purchasing agent in Winston-Salem, N.C. He stayed in touch with a human-resources manager there by phoning her every week. Through this friend's efforts, he landed a few interviews -- though no job -- with a different department.

Three months ago, however, "she stopped taking my calls," Mr. Robertson remembers. He left several voicemails. One of her associates finally told him, "She's just busy. She's not going to call you back." He suspected his excessive appeals for assistance wore out his welcome. But the 38-year-old resident of Pfafftown, N.C., hesitated to volunteer ways that he might assist the HR official. "I don't have a whole lot to offer," Mr. Robertson said in early December. He failed to realize that even unemployed job seekers have valuable expertise and connections.

Nonetheless, last week Mr. Robertson joined RF Micro Devices, a high-tech company in Greensboro, N.C. A co-worker at a prior employer recommended him. He had sent her his résumé, then called every five weeks to check in. "I wasn't bugging her," he explains. "It took five months for that seed to come to fruition."

A number of the 200 messages flooding Kate Wendleton's e-mail box daily come "from people who have bugged me too much already for help," complains the president of Five O'Clock Club, a career counseling network in New York. She forwards some requests to colleagues.

On the other hand, Ms. Wendleton responds rapidly to a jobless manager who sometimes e-mails her three times a week. While working for a big insurance broker, he "got us a really important relationship there," she says. "If you aren't giving back more than you're getting from networking, then you're a baby in the job-search process."

You can also repair a rift with overtaxed network members by sticking to the allotted time during business get-togethers and e-mailing occasional updates when their guidance bears fruit.

Without positive feedback, contacts feel like they're "out in the void," remarks Pat Key, a vice president and founding member of a women's networking organization at Chubb, a property-casualty insurer in Warren, N.J. Ms. Key goes the extra mile, asking contacts upfront whether they can talk again once she meets a suggested referral.

Of course, any hint that your contacts feel overworked should inspire you to widen your web, no matter how uncomfortable you may feel about contacting strangers.

Mark E. Benson was a chief marketing officer for a division of a major financial-services company until a management restructuring in early 2003. His job hunt soon hit a brick wall. Repeatedly tapping his small group of recent contacts, he discovered that "there was only so much they could do because they weren't well networked or they didn't have the time."

So Mr. Benson aggressively expanded his network, largely through referrals from past acquaintances he had lost touch with. The 40-year-old New York marketing consultant figures he has met more than 1,000 people face to face over the past 18 months. The massive outreach generates consulting gigs and job offers.

"Like flossing," he observes, "networking has to be part of your regular routine."

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