



*The Performance Improvement Network  
for Financial Advisors*

## 9 Secrets of a Consummate Networker

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**Independent publicist Erik Filkorn has an uncanny ability to befriend nearly everyone with whom he comes into contact—and, often as not, to land their business too. Find out how he does it.**

You start to suspect there's something different about publicist Erik Filkorn when you walk into his office in the small town of Richmond, Vt., and notice the photographs hanging on the wall. The shots of alternative musician Michelle Shocked are flanked by, among others, a photo of Filkorn shaking hands with Bill Clinton and an autographed headshot of George Burns.

But it's when you walk down Main Street with Filkorn that you really grasp how special he is: he's on a first-name basis with nearly everyone in town. He knows the names of the folks handing out mail at the Post Office. He knows the guys sitting at the lunch counter at the Bridge Street café, as well as the owner and the employees behind the counter. He knows the woman pushing the baby jogger on the other side of the street, he knows her baby, and he knows the owners of the new video store on the corner (who, it so happens, became his clients within days of their grand opening).

It makes sense that Filkorn—whose diverse client base includes Vermont's own Northfield Savings Bank, Walt Disney Internet Group, and blues legend Johnny Winter—is a publicist. But he didn't learn his networking skills from working in PR. In fact, he says, the opposite is true—his penchant for people is what led him to his profession in the first place. "These are things I did before I was a publicist," he says of his people-meeting activities. "I built being a publicist around who I am and what I do."

Filkorn is not a financial advisor, but his business—like yours—depends critically on forming relationships with large numbers of people. And while some of his networking ability can be attributed to his personality and natural talents, much of Filkorn's success in connecting with people can be replicated with a little effort.

Here's how:

1. **Get curious.** Filkorn doesn't set out to "network." He just likes talking to folks. He's more interested in hearing their stories than in getting their business—which is precisely why he ends up getting so much business. "I'm highly curious about people. Everyone has a story," he explains—and he solicits those stories at every opportunity. "When I'm speaking to someone at some call center in Omaha, I'll ask, 'How many people are in your building? How do calls get flipped to you?' I'm just as

eager to draw out that person as I am a CEO. The CEO gets a chance to tell his story all the time, but the person in the call center is probably feeling like a robot. Just offer people the slightest opening to be a human being and they'll take it—and get really excited about it."

**2. Take risks.** Filkorn is never afraid to speak up or ask questions, even if doing so might make him look ridiculous. It's a trait he's possessed for most of his life. He recalls the night that set his professional life in motion. Just 18, he was at a club watching a local band and wishing he could be part of the action instead of out in the audience. "So I went up to the band's tour manager and said, 'Can I help?' A week later, I was the T-shirt guy for the most popular band in L.A. All the stars—Michelle Pfeiffer, Bruce Willis—they all wanted shirts. I mean, I had Bruce Willis coming up to me and asking, 'Hey man, can I get a T-shirt?'"

With that, Filkorn's career in the music business (which eventually morphed into his current PR gig) was off and running—all because he risked looking foolish that night. "You've got to just screw up your courage to ask," he says, "and not worry about what the answer is going to be."

**3. Offer to help.** Many of Filkorn's contacts—and much of his business—can be traced back to those three simple words he uttered in the nightclub: "Can I help?" They are, for example, behind the Bill Clinton "photo op." Filkorn ardently wanted to get involved in advancing the then-President's agenda, so—in typical Filkorn fashion—he picked up the phone, called the local headquarters of the National Democratic Party, and said, "'Can I help? I'm a publicist; you might find me useful.' The guy was kind of dismissive. But half an hour later he called me back and asked, 'Can you meet the White House press corps plane tomorrow? We need someone to get them on the bus.'"

The next morning, Filkorn found himself standing on the tarmac at a military base, and later, sitting on the press corps bus next to Anne Compton of "ABC News." During the whirlwind three days that followed, he remembers, "I was in the dugout with the team."

**4. Give and ye shall receive.** In mid-2002, a new DVD-only rental store opened in downtown Richmond. Some months earlier, Filkorn had spotted owners Kelly Arnold and Joe O'Brien on the street, asking passersby to complete a survey so they could prove demand for their concept and secure a bank loan. Filkorn filled out the survey, but he didn't stop there. He told Kelly and Joe, "This is a fantastic idea and the best thing that could happen for the town. I'm a publicist. I'll do anything I can to help you spread the word. You don't have to pay me."

Every time he saw them around town after that, he was enthusiastic and supportive, even though they never requested any help. "I'd ask them, 'How's it going? When are you opening? Oh, you got your loan!'" Finally, Film Buzz opened its doors. Filkorn went in to share his congratulations and told Kelly and Joe how easy it would be for them to get the store mentioned in some Vermont publications. "I explained the process to them and offered to drop off some sample press releases so they'd know how to go about it." A couple of days later, Filkorn recalls, he went in to rent a movie—and Kelly asked, "How do we go about hiring you and paying you to do this for us?"

**5. Pay attention to details.** You'd think a people person would naturally have a killer memory for names, but in Filkorn's case, you would be mistaken. "I'm terrible with names," he says, with a hint of embarrassment. But he always manages to recall the intricacies of people's lives and stories—and ultimately, that means more to them. "Even if I can't for the life of me remember someone's name," he explains, "I can ask, 'Hey, how did it go with your sister's party?' So I can still interact with him and show that I care who he is."

**6. Open your arms.** Filkorn's welcoming, "the more the merrier" attitude got him noticed in the community before he even moved in. He and his bride-to-be were still living in Los Angeles in 1997 when they decided to get married in Vermont. They figured the best way to keep the neighbors from complaining about a big, noisy reception was simply to invite them all. "We just asked the farmer on

whose property we were getting married who he thought would like to come out and dance and have a beer." As it turned out, that was pretty much everyone in the valley. After that, Filkorn laughs, "we existed as an entity. To this day, I'm still meeting people who say, 'Hey, I know you—I was at your wedding!'"

**7. Get people into their comfort zones.** Filkorn makes a point of trying to speak the same language as the folks with whom he interacts. He is careful to tailor the topic of conversation to each individual, and even changes his speech patterns when it seems appropriate. "I do press for tours that go all around the country, so in a single day I will talk to people at papers all along the East Coast, in Oklahoma City, Houston, Dallas, New Orleans... and all of those people are different." Filkorn says he lands in voice mail more often than not, so he listens carefully to people's outgoing messages, then adjusts the volume, pitch, and speed of his voice accordingly when he leaves his own message. "It's so important just to listen and figure out what people want to hear," Filkorn explains. "A lot of people don't even begin to listen. People walk into situations and assume their way of thinking or behaving is the preferred method at that moment. You'll get much more out of people if you try to appeal to them instead."

**8. Break the ice with humor.** Rather than shying away from awkward situations, Filkorn actually *creates* them, then uses them to connect with people. He calls this approach "throwing a brick through the window of ice." At a party where he doesn't know anyone, for example, he might stand near the food and ask people he doesn't know surprising questions, like "Are you with the bride or the groom?"—when the function he's attending is *not* a wedding. "It's from left field, and nobody ever gets it," he smiles. They might stammer for a moment, but they usually introduce themselves and the ice is broken. If they don't respond in good humor, he simply extends his hand and follows up with something self-deprecating like, "I never know what to say at these things," then introduces himself.

**9. Try to make the world better with every interaction.** Above all, Filkorn tries to put forth only positive energy. "I have a developmental disability that enhances my skills," he jokes. "When kids are two or three, they think they are the center of universe, that they can control it and that it is about them. Intellectually I know that's not true, but I still really believe I have the power to make the FedEx driver have a better day. So I put a little energy into making him feel better. You can't control other people's lives—but you can put that energy out, and eventually it comes back."