

## Networking to the max

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Most of us can meet-and-greet our way through an industry or evening event, particularly if there's a glass of wine nearby. Even more of us know how to use Facebook or LinkedIn to re-establish acquaintances and make new connections. But how many could start from scratch and create a living, breathing network of 1,600 members within seven months?

Chris Crowell is the founder and president of East Coast Connected (ECC), an organization that was launched last year to encourage the exchange of ideas, and build business ties, amongst Atlantic Canadians living in Toronto. ECC has achieved this by hosting forums, seminars, luncheons and evening activities, and by developing partnerships with universities, companies and governments in Ontario and across Atlantic Canada.

The group is model for anyone seeking to not only identify people with similar interests or backgrounds, but to then gather them together, online and in person. The techniques applied, and lessons learned, should be of interest to anyone interested in bolstering their networking skills.

A lawyer by training, as well as an MBA grad, Mr. Crowell is a senior associate director with Bell Canada in Toronto. He was recently named the 2008 recipient of Dalhousie University's Outstanding Young Alumnus Award. Mr. Crowell was here earlier to discuss how ECC came together and what others can take from the experience.



To join the conversation please **[click here](#)**

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**Noel Hulsman, globeandmail.com, writes:** Chris, thank you so much for joining us today. As a good Maritime boy myself, I am interested in the notion of East Coast Connected, and how it evolved. From a business perspective, however, I am intrigued about you actually got the organization off the ground. You've convinced a lot of people to come together. How did you do that? What were the initial steps?

**Chris Crowell writes:** The idea for East Coast Connected came about last summer. You could say the first thing I did was identify a need that others could relate too — there are lots of Atlantic Canadians living in Toronto and most still feel a strong sense of attachment to the region. From there, I made sure that I simplified the message of what ECC was trying to do — if people can't get it right away, they will start to lose interest.

Once I felt that the message was clear enough, I approached others who I thought would be passionate enough about the cause to join a board of directors. These were people that I knew through work or professional associations. Some were former university classmates. I can't stress enough how important it was to attract this connected group of people.

**Noel Hulsman writes:** I can see how you can grow from 10 to 20, in recruiting the first five or so, did you aim for a big name, a Frank McKenna-level star, and build around that, or did you go for volume, assuming that once you had a certain number of members, ECC would take on a life of its own?

**Chris Crowell writes:** We went for volume — we wanted to demonstrate to senior level people, and to ourselves, that there was a viable idea here. We used social networking to get started — Facebook specifically. Most of our directors already had Facebook accounts and large networks of Facebook friends. We invited our networks to show their support for ECC by joining a Facebook group. Within a week, we had 1,200 people. Shortly thereafter, we launched a website and started getting people to sign up on our mailing list. Even before our launch, the numbers on that list were impressive.

**RP from Etobicoke writes:** Other than giving away your business cards, what are some ways you think can really help the people you meet remember you?

**Chris Crowell writes:** Everybody gives out business cards now — it's the expectation. To really stand out you need to know the people you are speaking too. You have to relate to them on some level about something they have a passion for. With East Coast Connected, it was easy — Maritimers and Newfoundlanders generally feel passionately about their homes — they at least have some strong opinions. Striking up a conversation becomes easy.

Most importantly though, you need to speak on the subject with passion and energy.

**Sandy from Kelowna writes:** As a new graduate, I feel like the importance of networking was not taught in school. Do you have any tips for new entry-level professionals to network with older, wiser, more powerful people?

**Chris Crowell writes:** Get involved in the community. Senior level people not only tend to be successful in business, but also tend to be very active in the community. They are highly sought after to serve on volunteer boards, chair events and so on. Pick causes you are passionate about and get involved in some way with the planning, fund raising, and event coordination. It is a great opportunity to demonstrate your skills. Be the person who solves problems; no matter how small they are.

Also, take advantage of mentorship programs (East Coast Connected is launching one itself in the Greater Toronto Area). The thing to remember with mentors is that they are there to offer you career advice, not just to find you a job. Take a long term approach and build relationships — do not focus on the short term objective of the next job.

**Noel Hulsman writes:** Can I get you to elaborate a bit more on the perils of thinking 'short term'? What are the biggest mistakes you see rookie 'networkers' make?

**Chris Crowell writes:** I see it all the time — people approach a conversation with someone they believe can help them with an immediate goal — let's say land a job. You have to look at that conversation from the other person's perspective. Someone you want to ask for a job probably gets frequently approached for the same thing.

You need to show what you're capable of before asking for something. In fact, actions often speak louder than words. Instead of asking someone for a job, find out what projects they're involved with in the community — offer to volunteer. Then they will want to follow up with you — now you're a resource, not someone they just met asking for a favour.

**C. Stevenson from Toronto writes:** How do you re-connect with people you met at a networking event without coming off like a stalker? What is a good timeline before you send a quick hello email?

**Chris Crowell writes:** I personally try to find something in common with the person I have been speaking with — an interest we both share. If you actually make a connection with the other person, you are simply continuing a conversation when you follow up and that makes it simple. Now, not every meeting at a networking event will result in a genuine connection. Find out what the person you're speaking with is interested in; perhaps forward them an article that you came across on that subject. You want to make the follow up just as much about them as it is about you.

**Dan MacDonald from Halifax writes:** ECC uniquely enables our organization to connect with young professionals who may have interest in Atlantic Canadian business and or career opportunities. Many of these expatriots have highly desirable business experience sought after by our clients and ourselves. Dan MacDonald, president and CEO of Halifax-based InNOVAcorp

**Chris Crowell writes:** ECC's membership is primarily made up of young professionals and these are the individuals who are highly sought after by employers.

The problem most organizations have when they are trying to attract talent or when a city, province or region is trying to promote itself is finding the right target audience for the message. ECC members are self selected — they have essentially said, "I want to be informed about what's going on in Atlantic Canada". This allows organizations to target their audience more effectively — and spend marketing dollars more efficiently.

**Jackie R from Toronto writes:** Once you make that important connection to a peer through networking, how do you keep that relationship going?

**Chris Crowell writes:** It comes down to finding some way to be helpful to the other person and to finding out what you have in common with them. If you're in the same industry, invite them to an event they may find interesting — a lecture, a networking event, etc. There are lots of such events in Toronto and in any urban market across Canada. Many are inexpensive or free of charge. By doing this you make yourself something of an opinion leader in your niche. You'll find people will start approaching you.

**Noel Hulsman writes:** Chris, that's our hour. Thank you so much for your time and your insights today. It's been a very interesting discussion. Have a great weekend. Cheers.

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