



Undefined Creative: Why You Need to Take the Time to Keep Your Networks Vibrant

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You never really get away from the network you originally build.

I started building mine in earnest in February 2000, two years out of art school, with a BFA and a string of starter jobs that led to dead ends. An ad for an After Effects animator brought me to media2, a post house in Northern New Jersey. It was a nascent company - two founding partners, a recently hired full-time editor, and now me, their second "official" employee.

We grew to ten people occupying a floor on Madison Avenue, and I transformed from an ambitious kid into an art director with a proven track record. Yet, I wanted to spread my wings. In 2004, I left, with a vision to become a studio in my own right.

That, I did! evolving from a freelancer to an independent designer for hire to a bootstrap startup of two artists armed with "smoke and mirrors" instead of office space and staff. And, after parting ways with that partner in 2010, my dream took shape as Undefined Creative, a boutique design studio/de facto agency.

All this time, for better and for worse, 99% of the work that kept the doors open came via referrals - from former colleagues, professional friends and

acquaintances, even some client "fans." The network determined everything, from the industry sectors to the budgets and reach of the projects I landed.

The network helped create my success. The shortcomings of my network limited that success.

My studio was thriving, but it wasn't self-sustaining. Like any business, it needed a steady stream of work. I didn't realize to what extent abandoning the general workforce would limit my ability to continue to expand my network organically. Everyone I consulted said I needed to "get out there," but that's far easier suggested than accomplished. What was formerly an easy post-work drink with fellow freelancers now turned into calculated, coordinated effort—a dance of email exchanges rarely leading to anything more substantial than a "maybe." Whereas before I was seeking a social exchange, now—no matter what I told myself—this was a sales effort. I hate selling.

Frustration propelled my doubts. Prior to setting foot onto the entrepreneurial path, I was made aware that "money makes money." I had none, so I didn't expect success to come easy. But I was completely unprepared to face another correlation: existing networks lead to new networks. Maybe my network simply wasn't enough to sustain a business. My company couldn't afford dedicated sales staff and even finding representation required stronger contacts than I had.

Could I have cast a better, stronger, wider net if I freelanced longer? What if I'd rotated through a couple more staff positions? Would my business be stronger for it now? This may sound naïve, but I was 26 when I chose to pursue my own thing, and frankly far too inexperienced.

With social networking, this challenge grew exponentially. Now, not only did I feel the pressure to "get out there" physically, I was also told that I needed to tweet, post, blog and engage with my fan base on a near daily basis. To take these tasks to heart would mean ceasing to actually operate the studio I was promoting!

One day, I finally drew a mental map of my career and traced my constellations of connections. I saw the evolution of long-term professional relationships, some spanning multiple companies, some turning into personal friendships. Best part is, the people I attracted early in my career, the people I've grown to know and love, these were the people traveling alongside me still.

Like my former bosses, still on Madison Avenue. We never ceased working together. I fielded last-minute requests for creative direction. They responded in kind if I needed access to space or equipment. Whenever Undefined landed jobs that required production, we contracted them and I got to joke about paying off all the salary I'd earned as their once full-time staff.

For years, we borrowed their conference rooms for meetings, finally renting their

surplus space and adding our logo to the front door. Until, one day, we realized that our "white label" relationship deserved better than that. For fifteen years, we've come together in so many combinations - bosses, employees, contractors, sub-contractors, collaborators. Now we're adding "joint venture partners" to this list, as an official creative alliance.

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Luckily, though it took years, I finally see that I don't have to - I don't want to. As I look around, all I see are new iterations of existing relationships. My intern from 2003 is now one of my go-to animators. My Executive Producer, though a close friend of 20+ years, was also a former colleague. Producers I'd met in my freelance life are now independent entities, bringing their projects to UC. Many of our clients switched jobs, but didn't want to see our creative collaboration come to an end, so they introduced UC to their new colleagues and decision makers. I'm in the process of writing a case study in collaboration with a client-turned-friend.

Looking back, I'm grateful that my incessant doubt finally forced me to reevaluate my stance, not just on the network's value, but on the meaning of "networking" itself. We've been conditioned to believe that it's the size of this net we're casting, particularly in our social media. The quality of this net is harder to assess. I spent many years overlooking the value that was right under my nose. Perhaps mine is a small network, but it's a network loyal to its own.

Yes, it's important to continue to get out there and seek new possibilities. I've plenty of examples of making amazing contacts because I did, went, tried something new. Patience is a must, since years can pass before a possibility turns into a paid project. Making this a two-way street - actively linking people with opportunities - will score some good networking karma, and make you feel good in the process.

But, I invite you to look at your existing network in a different light. Who knows what creative connections you'll finally recognize as waiting to happen.

Take Maria's advice and keep your network strong on the PromaxBDA LinkedIn group.

Founded in 2010, Undefined Creative is a creative agency blending uncommon ideas with sophisticated design and polished execution to establish and cultivate brand awareness, through motion graphics and animation. The agency's clients include national consumer and media brands across platforms.