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- Student Affairs

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[Student Affairs](#) > [University Career Services](#) > [article01](#)

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- [Alumni](#)
- [Employers](#)
- [Graduate Students](#)
- [Undergraduate Students](#)
- [Parents](#)
- [Calendar of Events](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Site Index](#)
- [Student Affairs](#)

How to Land Meetings and Spur Conversations

By MIKE MARRINER and NATHAN GEBHARD WITH JOANNE GORDON

People often assume that following your passion (or, as we say it, following your ownroad) means being reckless. That's just not true. It's possible to take wise and safe risks. You just have to work hard and be creative.

Hard work means that you may have to take a lower-level position to get your foot in the door, do tasks outside of your job description and work long hours. As a teenager, Mike Lazzo loved television, and he took a job in the mailroom at an Atlanta cable station. He performed well, made a point of meeting people in every department and, bit by bit, was promoted. Today, Lazzo heads programming for the Cartoon Network.

Hard work also means you're willing to take on a second job to make extra money. Beth McCarthy Miller, the director of "Saturday Night Live," worked at the Gap for extra cash during her early years as a production assistant at MTV.

As for creativity, you must look beyond seemingly obvious jobs to find ones that put you in touch with your passions. There are dozens of ways to make a living that are associated with your interests, be it fashion, writing, nature, cars, whatever. One way to find them is to talk with others about their own paths in life. In short, you have to explore.

Identify 10 People

We suggest you start with the simple goal of meeting 10 people. Begin with your hobbies. Do you love photography, writing or surfing the Web? Pick three people who are in some way related to it, like a photographer, newspaper reporter, or the founder of your favorite Web site. Don't worry if you're not fired up to follow their exact footsteps. Just meet with them and hear their stories.

Second, pick three people who are in an area that you think might be interesting: advertising, marketing, the Internet, not-for-profit, social work, fashion design, engineering, whatever. These folks will give you the real scoop

on what it's like to work, day to day, in a specific field and what you need to break in. You might learn it's not what you envisioned.

Third, pick three wild cards. These are people you never imagined you'd meet but consider impressive and interesting: a movie producer, an Olympic speed skater, a scientist, a construction worker, the chief executive of a multibillion dollar company, an orchestra conductor. Again, don't worry about whether you can picture yourself in their shoes. Just trust that the insights they'll share about their own experiences can translate to your life.

That leaves one more interview. Let someone else pick this person for you. This should be a truly serendipitous meeting. For us it was Manny the Lobsterman, whom we stumbled upon while we round-tripped across Maine. He turned out to be one of the most fascinating, inspirational, down-to-earth people on our trip.

How to Arrange Meetings

Being referred to someone is a lot easier than making a cold call. Most people will agree to meet you if, for example, their college buddy Bob told you about them. These sources can help you get started: parents and siblings, relatives, friends and friends' parents, high-school teachers, your college alumni office, past employers, your doctors, parents' neighbors and friends, college professors and sorority or fraternity alumni.

As for finding people with whom you have absolutely no connection, the key is to pay attention. People with amazing roads are all around you. Every cool organization has a founder, leader and hip employees. Every CD cover has lists of people who made it happen. Do you like Smoothies? Call someone from Jamba Juice. Obsessed with PlayStation? Dial up Sony in San Francisco and ask to speak with one of the game's designers.

Whether you cold-call a CEO or start up a conversation with a guy in a coffee shop, it's definitely nerve-racking. The worst thing that can happen is that people can say no. And they will. But who really cares? If they aren't hip enough to take even 15 minutes to meet, they aren't worth your time.

Remember, you aren't selling anything and you aren't asking people to spend money or give you a job. You're simply in search of advice about how to build your future. Your pitch explains who you are and why you're calling. If someone referred you, throw that name in up front, "Bob Smith gave me Mr. Big's number and suggested I call."

Final pointers: Ask for 20 minutes at least three weeks away. Who can't spare that? Inevitably, you'll end up staying for at least a half an hour. And with every request, emphasize that you aren't asking for a job and that you just want to learn about that person's road.

Be Persistent

Persistence is key. Christian Oh, a senior studying international management at Pepperdine University, is interested in the restaurant business and wanted to meet Asian chef and restaurateur Nobu Matsuhisa to learn how he came to open and operate the four-star restaurants called Nobu.

Oh had never before made a cold call when he dialed Nobu's restaurant in San Francisco and asked to speak with the head chef. His request was denied, but he called every day for two weeks until he eventually reached Nobu's personal assistant. It seemed like another dead end when Oh was told that Nobu was leaving for Tokyo in a few days and too busy to meet with him.

Determined, Oh went to the restaurant and, when he spotted Nobu, walked up to him. "I politely introduced myself, told him that I'd read his book and asked