What Paul Revere Can Teach Claims Professionals About The Benefits Of Building A Strong Professional Network

By Taylor Smith – August 12, 2010

It really is amazing what you can learn from history

Is professional networking (so-called social networking) relevant for claims professionals? Does it make them more effective, help them to identify resources they need to do their job better, find the right attorney, be creative, identify emerging technologies, spark their imagination, and set industry trends? Or are they a waste of time, an invasion of privacy, or just not part of your world?

To look at that, let's examine the story of Paul Revere.

The Ride of Paul Revere

Revere is pretty well known to all of us. Most of us have a pretty good sense for the fact that he rode a horse through the countryside in April of 1775, sounding the alarm that the British were on the move. What is less well known is that he did not ride alone. Another man, William Dawes, made a similar ride that night, leaving at the same time Revere did, and later a third man, Samuel Prescott, joined with them.

Yet Revere is the person we remember, in part because his warnings were so much more effective than his two colleagues. Some accounts say that as many as 40 people got on their horses and rode off in different directions after his warning, further spreading the news in a rapidly expanding information network. Later, Revere went on to form a militia, serving as a Major and then Lieutenant Colonel, and then a fort commander. Poems were written about him. His face is on the $5,000 US Savings Bond.

Much has been made of Revere's success and notoriety as a result of this ride (as compared to his two fellow riders). Malcom Gladwell, in the Tipping Point, suggests that Revere was so effective because he was a "connector," – people who know large numbers of other people and who are in the habit of making introductions (i.e. "connecting" people in a network). According to Gladwell, true connectors are very rare (1 in several thousand), but they are exceptionally effective at identifying resources, setting trends, and influencing industries.

In 2005 the Harvard Business Review analyzed the Revere story in their article "How to Build Your Network." Building on Gladwell's concepts, they point out that Revere was an "information broker" because he was a small business man (and knew lots of people) and because he was politically active (and made lots of introductions). Of equal importance, he knew which other "information brokers" to warn during his ride (remember the 40 other riders setting off into the night?). Dawes, by contrast, was not an information broker nor did he know any information brokers, so the information he had (his warning) stayed within a small group of people instead of expanding outward.

It's who you know, not what you know, and how to build a smarter network

The HBR article addresses how to diagnose your own network and suggests that, in order to build a network rich in social capital, networkers should look to cultivate powerful super-connectors ("brokers") who are not in positions of formal authority (which is where everyone else looks). In short, people who create large networks with trust, diversity and brokerage, raise their level of information **_from what they know, to who they know_**.

Christakis and Fowler, in their book Connected, point out that the average American has 4 close social contacts (known as their "core discussion network"). However, the influence of your actions and the actions of your friends ripples through 3 degrees of your network (*that's to and from your friends' friends' friends!*). Combined with the results of the Stanley Milgram experiment, which confirmed that all people are connected by an average of 6 steps (think Kevin Bacon), the potential in networks is quite powerful indeed. In short, you're being affected by people you don't know; more positively stated, your influence on others can be very wide.

The rapid (incredible really) expansion of technology platforms like LinkedIn® can enhance the way that we can connect with others. They formalize our networks and make them easier to visualize and diagnose. What does your network look like? Is it diverse? Expansive? And who are your "brokers"? Who do you know who "seems to know everyone"? How are you cultivating those relationships?

The uses of LinkedIn are too numerous to mention (LinkedIntelligence.com lists 100+ ways to use the platform!). However, from a claims management perspective, LinkedIn can help to identify subject matter experts, learn from discussion groups, post questions to peers, identify trends, and connect with similar (and not so similar) professionals.

So be more like Paul Revere and expand your network. You never know when you are going to have to take a midnight ride and may need a little help.