

Why Your Strongest Contacts Are Not Always Your Best Contacts—and What to Do About It

By [LawVision](#) on July 12, 2016

In early March 1955, a young African-American woman refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery, Alabama, city bus. Her name was not Rosa Parks.

Rosa refused to give up her seat later that same year in December, and her refusal is now widely known as the catalyst for the modern-day civil rights movement. Because of that single act of defiance, a boycott of the city busses was organized and segregation laws across the South began to crumble, people began to rise up in protest to advance the cause of civil rights, and a 26-year-old preacher named Martin Luther King would find his voice and inspire a nation.

But what of the other woman? And she was not alone. A third woman refused to give up her seat in September of the same year. Why did neither of them become the catalyst and hero that Rosa Parks did? According to [Charles Duhigg](#), author of [The Power of Habit](#), the answer lies in something called “weak ties.”

Duhigg explains that, unlike the first two women, Rosa Parks was extremely involved in her community. She attended the local Methodist church, was secretary of the local NAACP chapter, volunteered at a homeless shelter, belonged to the Botanical Club, helped run a youth organization at a Lutheran church, knitted blankets for a local hospital with a group of friends, and helped young, wealthy white debutantes with last-minute gown alterations.

Most of us limit our circle of friends to those like us. We tend to socialize with people who earn roughly the same amount of money, live in the same neighborhoods, come from the same backgrounds, and look the same as us. Rosa Parks was different. She had strong relationships with people from diverse backgrounds in Montgomery, and each of those people had his or her own circle of friends, the members of which knew Rosa Parks peripherally through their strong relationships. These “weak tie” relationships created peer pressure in the community that was strong enough to make the subsequent bus boycott a success.

The connection to business development networks is not hard to see. Assume that you have a list of the people in your network and are diligently keeping in touch with the key people on that list. If you are particularly organized, you may have even prioritized the list into categories (see the discussion in the [post on building a network and prioritizing contacts here](#)). The logical next step is to spend most of your time (some would go so far as to say all of your time) only on the top-tier category—those whom you are closest to and who offer the highest chances of bringing you additional work. Though that approach may be right, it ignores the power of weak ties. Setting aside the fact that focusing exclusively on only those people who can bring you new business seems a rather hollow, meaningless way to live your life, research suggests that the second tier of people may be just as important as the first tier.

Think about the people in that second tier. Many of them are in that group because they do not work in your industry or practice in your area of law. They may not be members of your clubs or associations, or they may have different social networks or interests. In short, their circles are different from yours.

There is no question that focusing on those who bring you work now is important, but restricting yourself to only that

group insulates you from new opportunities, may ultimately lead to a finite amount of work, and, by the way, may bore you to death. Staying in touch with your second tier group—your weak ties—albeit in a less intense and less time consuming way, connects you to other networks of people that provide new and different referrals and opportunities that your key group of contacts may not be able to provide.

Weak ties are important. [Mark Granovetter](#), Harvard trained sociologist and current chair of the Sociology Department at Stanford, published a now-famous paper in the 70s, called "[The Strength of Weak Ties](#)." Granovetter learned that weak ties allow us access to social networks where we don't otherwise belong. His study focused on how people found jobs, and he discovered that most people find them by networking through weak ties, not by connecting with strong ties.

The same logic applies to business development. Granovetter claims that people with few weak ties are deprived of information and left with only the views of their closest relationships. This deprivation puts them at a disadvantage. Specifically, he points out that weak ties are an important resource in making possible mobile opportunity within professional specialties.

Information and ideas thus flow more easily through the specialty, giving it some 'sense of community,' activated at meetings and conventions. Maintenance of weak ties may well be the most important consequence of such meetings.

So, if weak ties are important, what should you do about them? First, definitely, do not give up on your strong ties. Most of your personal one-on-one time should be spent cultivating those relationships, but make sure you are also carving out some time to connect with weak ties in a less frequent manner or on a "one-to-many" basis. E-mails, social media, events, newsletters, conferences, and social circles all serve to forge and keep those relationships alive. Brainstorm about other methods to stay in touch with your weak ties. Think about other social networks some of your weak ties may have, and get strategic about which of those networks may be important to you. At events, be curious when you meet people—get to know their businesses, and think about how their businesses and social networks may dovetail with your own work.

Connecting with weak ties need not be time consuming. With a small amount of effort, it may make the difference between expanding your practice and simply maintaining the current flow of work.

The next time you look at your list of contacts, don't forget to consider the power of your weak ties.