by Joan Adams

The Six Degrees Of Separation

Some great clients are a lot closer than you think.

Somebody you know knows somebody — who knows somebody else, who knows someone who is very tight with someone you would like to be your next great customer. And that is all very interesting in the hypothetical, but just exactly how does this little bit of trivial speculation get you in touch with that person who is regrettably two, three, four, five or even six people removed from you?

I am sure you have all heard the expression, "The Six Degrees of Separation." Not only was it the title of a book, a play and a movie, but also it first appeared as the name of an interesting and important study about connectedness performed by Harvard professor Stanley Milgram in 1967.

Milgram wanted to learn more about the probability that two randomly selected people would know each other or at least would know someone who knew someone, who knew someone who knew the other person. His study posed the question: On average, how many people does a person need to go through to find a connection to the completely anonymous, randomly selected person? Milgram's experiment was designed to measure that number of people we need to go through in order to reach or connect us with someone we have never met. He developed an experiment where he could measure connectedness by "counting" the number of mini-connections that took place between two randomly selected people.

While you are reading this little experiment, start thinking about some companies you would love to do business with — but at present, you don't have a contact there. Here's Milgram's "Six Degrees of Separation":

- Milgram selected people living in Omaha and Wichita as the starting points and folks living in Boston as the end point of a chain of correspondence. (Remember, this is pre-Internet and the Bell monopoly charged big bucks for long distance calls.) These cities were selected because they represented a great distance in the United States, both socially and geographically at the time (1967). This experiment was done through the mail.
- Information packets were sent to randomly selected individuals in Omaha and Wichita. The packets included letters that detailed the study's purpose and some basic information about the target person in Boston. They also contained a roster on which the participants were to write their own names.
- Upon receiving the packet, the recipient was asked whether he or she personally knew the target person in Boston who is described in the letter. If so, the person was to forward the packet directly to that person. For the purposes of this study, knowing someone "personally" was defined as knowing someone on a first-name basis.
- In all cases, the Wichita and Omaha people did not personally know the target person in Boston. The letter included the specific instruction NOT to contact the target person directly. Instead, they were to think of someone they knew personally who they thought had a better chance of knowing the target person. They were to sign their name on the roster and forward the packet to that person, who then would start the procedure all over again. Each time the packet was forwarded, a forwarding person sent a postcard to the researchers at Harvard. This way Milgram's group could track the packet's progress toward the target.
- If and when the packet eventually reached the target person in Boston, the researchers could study the roster and count the number of times it had been forwarded from one person to another. In those cases where some packets never reached the Boston person, the incoming postcards helped identify where the chain was broken.

The Results

Shortly after the experiment began, letters started arriving at the target person's address in Boston and the researchers received postcards from the various participants along the way. Sometimes the packet arrived at the target's address in as few as one or two hops, while other connections were made up of as many as nine or 10 hops. More often than not, someone along the chain didn't forward the packet, thus it never reached the target. In fact, 232 of the 296 packets never reached the destination.

However, 64 letters eventually did reach the target. Studying these chains of connections, Milgram discovered that the average number of connections

between the starting folks in Wichita and Omaha and the target in Boston was about six people. Hence, the phrase: The Six Degrees of Separation.

What "The Six Degrees" Means For Your Business

Based on the Milgram experiment, you can say that on average there are six people standing between you and some of the most desirable contacts in the business. Maybe it's about time you conducted a little Milgram-type experiment yourself. Target five or six people — potential clients — folks with whom you really, really, really would like to have contact. Select some people you do know, who don't necessarily know the guy, but they might know someone who does — or someone who knows someone else who does. Your first connection point is with your customers, your colleagues, and your business contacts. These are people who know people. If you have a good working relationship with these folks, they should be willing to probe their contact base on your behalf. And, of course, they need to be saying good things about you, such that their contacts will take your request for contact out to their next level of connectiveness.

There's both good news and bad news to be learned from the experiment. Because 78% of the packets never got to their end destination, it is a good bet that four out of five of your attempts are going to fail. But 22% — one out of five — are going to go through, and faster. We use the phone, text messaging and e-mail without a second thought. You will see the results of your Six Degrees of Separation experiment much faster than Milgram did in 1967. Think about it — some great clients are a whole lot closer than you think. <<

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