

6 Degrees of Separation – the story behind the theory

In my coaching practice, I frequently work with people who are creating and developing a business, often sole traders. I was espousing the beauty of the six degrees of separation the other day with a client whose dream it is to do the make-up for a particular celebrity. I described how the theory works and suggested she do some research on her target and start telling people about her dream. 10 days later I received an excited email from her saying that she had found someone who works with her celebrity's mother and will put her introduction letter into her hand! She is ecstatic!

Six degrees of separation is the theory that anyone on the planet can be connected to any other person on the planet through a chain of acquaintances that has no more than five intermediaries. The theory was first proposed in 1929 by the Hungarian writer Frigyes Karinthy in a short story called Chains.

In 1967, American sociologist Stanley Milgram devised a new way to test the theory, which he called "the small-world problem". He randomly selected people in the American Midwest to send packages to a stranger located in Massachusetts, several thousand miles away. The senders knew the recipient's name, occupation, and general location. They were instructed to send the package to a person they knew on a first-name basis who they thought was most likely, out of all their friends, to know the target personally. That person would do the same, and so on, until the package was personally delivered to its target recipient. Although the participants expected the chain to include at least a hundred intermediaries, it only took (on average) between five and seven intermediaries to get each package delivered and three of the packages were delivered by the same person. Milgram's findings were published in *Psychology Today* and inspired the phrase six degrees of separation. It has to be said, Milgram's research was discounted after it was discovered that he based his conclusion on a very small number of packages.

However! In 2001, Duncan Watts, a professor at Columbia University, continued his own earlier research into the phenomenon and recreated Milgram's experiment on the Internet. Watts used an e-mail message as the "package" that needed to be delivered, and surprisingly, after reviewing the data collected by 48,000 senders and 19 targets (in 157 countries), Watts found that the average number of intermediaries was indeed six.

A trivia game called Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon illustrates this theory. The name, of course, is a pun on the phrase and its rhyming with Bacon's name. The game requires a group of players to connect any film actor to Kevin Bacon as quickly as possible and in as few links as possible. The concept is simple, but finding the smallest number of links can be difficult. The way you link an actor with Bacon is like so:

- Pick a film actor, any film actor.
- Link the actor you've chosen to Bacon via the movies they've shared with other actors until you end up with Kevin Bacon himself.

Here is an example, using Elvis Presley:

- Elvis Presley was in *Change of Habit* (1969) with Edward Asner
- Edward Asner was in *JFK* (1991) with Kevin Bacon
- Therefore Elvis Presley has a Bacon number of 2.

A couple of years ago I did a presentation on the six degrees of separation at an Athena Networking lunch, and to illustrate the theory, I asked anyone in the group to call out the name of their dream client. One smart Alec called out "Robbie Williams!" My heart sank, but 5 people in the room put their hands up as having a contact who could ultimately lead to Robbie.

Any seasoned networker will know that the more specific you can be about the contact you are looking for, the more successful you will be. Whilst chairing another Athena lunch in Slough some time ago, one lady asked for a contact within a specific local company. As it happened, the new marketing executive for the company was due to have attended the meeting but couldn't make it, but I had her contact details. As she hadn't been able to attend, unless this specific contact had been mentioned, the details wouldn't have been passed on.

Whether you're starting a new company, have a Great Idea, or are already established, it's worth making the most of your network with the six degrees. So, have a think about it. Who is your dream client...? "Act boldly, and unseen forces will come to your aid." Dorothea Brande, author.

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