

A hundred feet above the Apurimac River, near the remote village of Huinchiri, Peru, suspension bridges have connected the Lima-Cuzco road since the 14th century. Using four miles of braided coya grass, the Inca constructed each bridge in phases. First a bowman attached a fine thread to an arrow and fired it across the gorge. An alert partner on the other side tied a cord to the thread so it could be pulled back the other way. Successively thicker ropes followed back and forth, finally hauling into position the foot-thick 200-pound floor cables.

THE BEGINNINGS

Like those bridges, strong business relationships start with small connections. A message, a call, a few replies, a visit. Each volley builds upon the last, strengthening bonds of admiration and dependence until trust and value cross with ease. Rapport has always been built in stages like this, even in this age of e-mail and the Web.

But taking advantage of the Internet means reaching the individuals *behind* the computers, and making it easy for them to find you. One thoughtfully composed e-mail message to the right person can change everything. So here are a few ideas for connecting with people using the modern world's arrows and threads. I hope they inspire you to discover many more.

Make original contributions and cast them far and wide. Give a little polish to solutions you've invented along the way and make them available to all: a browser workaround, a technique for drawing raindrops. Pick a topic you know and love, make the best Web site for it, and submit it to the search engines. Join mailing lists and answer more questions than you ask. Contribute to public graphics collections run by enlightened folk, like those at *www.designheaven.com*. Write an article for an earnest e-zine like *www.digital-web.com*. Free distribution of useful things scatters seeds of goodwill—and the fan mail will swell your ego.

Fashion appealing arrows. When contacting someone out of the blue, you can break the ice (and plumb responsiveness) with gifts. Generosity doesn't have to cost a lot. Give samples of your own products or services. Find and compliment original contributions: great shareware, a well-managed resource list, helpful answers in a discussion area. Write reviews for terrific books in the online bookstores. Send kudos suitable for quoting to the most worthy Webmasters. Recommend useful Web sites on a mailing list.

Share your ideas. When experience amasses to a certain point, good ideas generate spontaneously, but ideas thrive on development and circulation more than secrecy. Try e-mailing one directly to a competitor; you could learn a lot from open debate, and be in-



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Illustration by Belle Mellor

OF BRIDGES

spired by exposed counterexamples. Share them, too, to find good people to work with. You may fear someone will steal your ideas—but underdeveloped ones fail easily. A great idea can become even greater by crossing sturdy bridges between minds.

Train like an athlete in respect and kindness. Undeserving fools can provide especially useful targets for this practice, but closely tend your best relationships: ask old customers what they're dreaming, commend a peer's work from the heart. Distill criticism until it's gin-clear. Drink most of it yourself.

Stay in control. I've gotten addicted to finding and making new contacts, and ignored most everything else for weeks at a time. Rein in this kind of bingeing so you don't overcompensate with neglect. Grant fury and idiocy the peace of your disinterest. Beware distracting fascination and praise. Most contacts will be fruitless. Your good deeds will probably be punished at some point—people will ask for all kinds of tedious favors, e-mail exchanges will mushroom into novels—so practice polite brevity when saying no.

There can be no doubt: you have missed hundreds of chances—a message unanswered, a great impression unacknowledged, a rope uncaught, falling to the chasm floor. You will miss hundreds more. You may simply accept this as your fate. But fate is a comforting illusion; don't let it cloud against opportunities you can't measure. And the most important thing you can't measure is who you should know, or should know better. ▀

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